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Anglo-Saxons

Migrations, invasions and the battle for Britain

Alfred the Great

Treasures of Sutton Hoo

Early Christianity

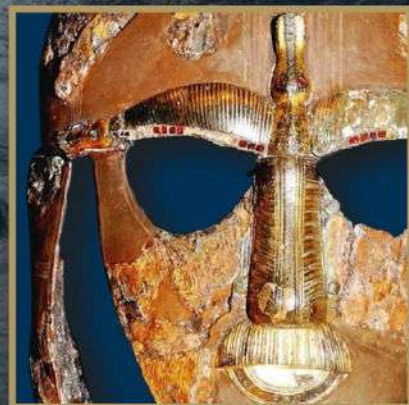
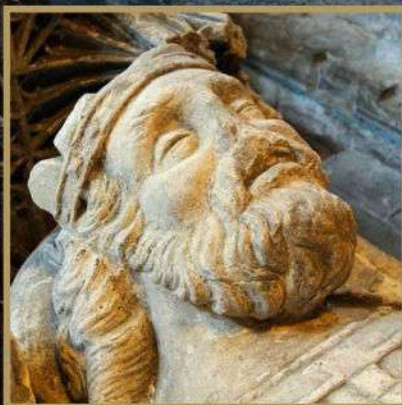
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From the crumbling of Roman rule in the fifth century AD until the triumph of the Normans (themselves descended from Norsemen) in 1066, Britain's – and especially England's – history is dominated by two groups: the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. Both originating in northern Europe, **the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings arrived in waves of migrants and invaders**, battling and making accommodations with both each other and the peoples already inhabiting these islands. They left a profound legacy in our language, our laws, our place names and remarkable artefacts that continue to be discovered today.

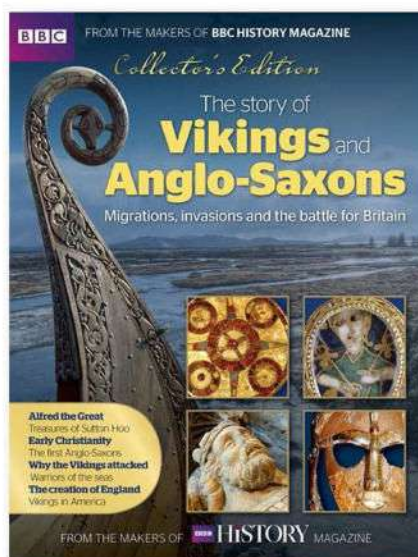
In this special edition of *BBC History Magazine* we explore both groups in depth, with articles written by some of the country's foremost experts. Discover the latest thinking about the 'Dark Ages', find out about the **Vikings' fearsome martial prowess** and get the lowdown on leading figures of the age such as Alfred the Great and Æthelstan – England's first king. Plus, we take the story further afield by charting some of the Vikings' voyaging adventures, including their **famed expeditions to America**.

This special edition is a compendium of some of the best articles on the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings to have appeared in *BBC History Magazine* over recent years. I hope that you find it an enjoyable read. Do also check out our monthly magazine, in which we will continue to analyse this fascinating era.

Rob Attar

Editor

BSME Editor of the Year 2015, Special Interest Brand



“Theirs was not a limited world – **they navigated the motorways of the sea**, trading in goods and ideas at the limits of the known world”

Historian **JANINA RAMIREZ** debunks entrenched ideas about the so-called 'Dark Ages' on page 114

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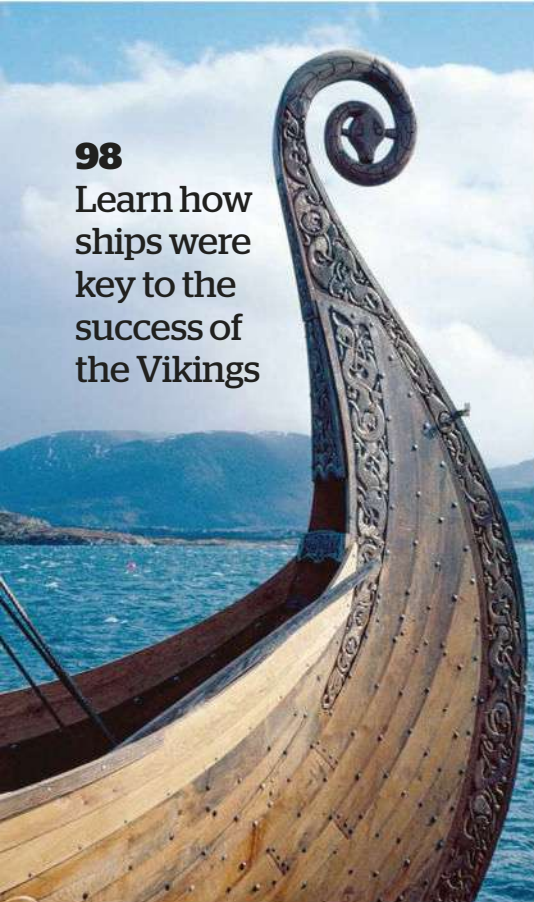
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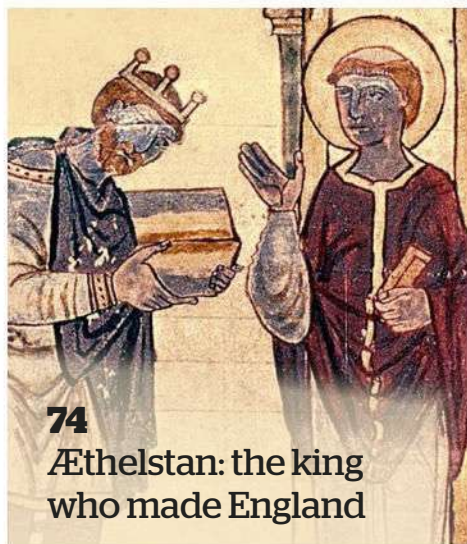
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The Vikings and Anglo-Saxons

Ryan Lavelle traces the rise of the Anglo-Saxons and the arrival of the Vikings from the wane of Rome to the Conquest of 1066



A fourth-century gold solidus bearing the head of Emperor Honorius

410

As Rome is sacked, **its emperor Honorius advises the inhabitants of 'Bretannia'** to defend themselves. Around this time, people from the North Sea coasts of continental Europe settle in Britain, first as Roman mercenaries, then later claiming land for themselves. These will later become known as Anglo-Saxons, and the area of Britain they come to dominate is England.

597

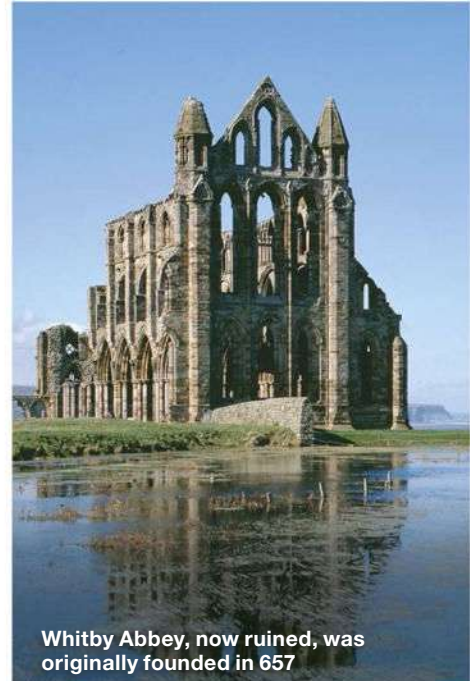
Sent from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great, the missionary **Augustine arrives in Kent**, where King Æthelberht agrees to adopt Christianity in his kingdom. Augustine (later Saint Augustine) becomes the first archbishop of Canterbury, and Christianity gives Æthelberht a means of extending Kentish domination over other Anglo-Saxon kings – at least until Æthelberht's death in 616.

St Augustine, shown in a study for a stained glass window



664

At a synod in Whitby, overseen by the Northumbrian king Oswiu, the Irish and Roman churches in Britain agree to **celebrate Easter according to the same calendar**. This represents a triumph for the Roman organisation of the church to which the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms at that time subscribed.



Whitby Abbey, now ruined, was originally founded in 657

400

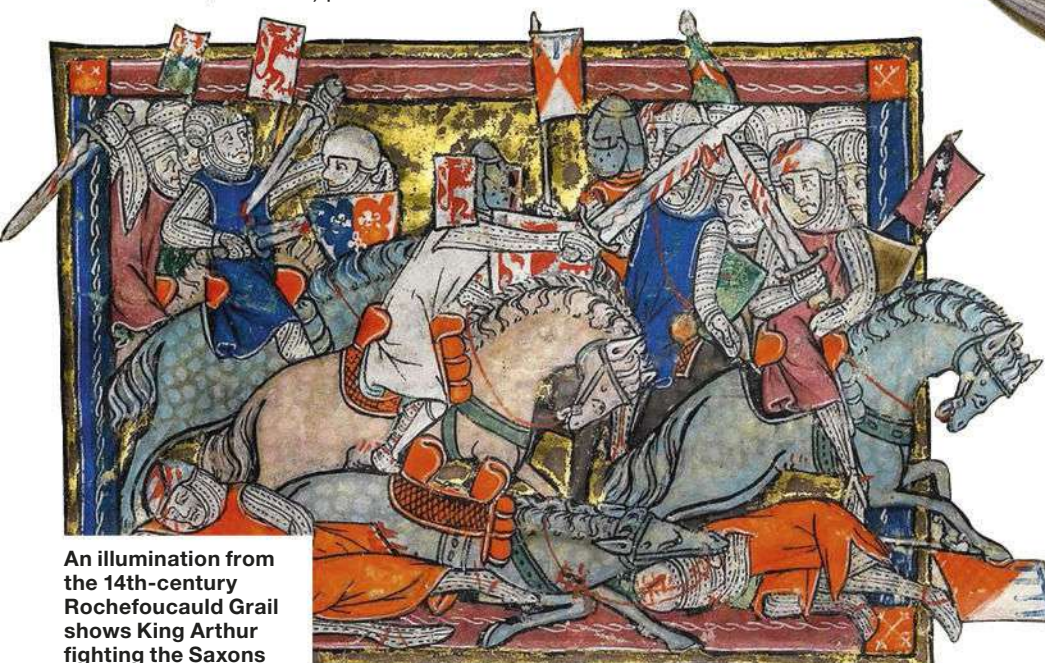
500

600

700

c500

Gildas, a west British churchman, writes of **generations of barbarian invaders – their invasions punishment for the unrighteous**. His work is read by many, and his narrative of invasions, exterminations and conflicts (including a victory over the Saxons later ascribed to 'Arthur') proves influential for centuries to come.



An illumination from the 14th-century Rochefoucauld Grail shows King Arthur fighting the Saxons



An artist's impression of the ship buried at Sutton Hoo and unearthed in 1939

c625

A ship is laid into the ground at what's now Sutton Hoo in Suffolk during the burial of a high-ranking figure, possibly King Rædwald of the East Angles, who had accepted Christian baptism while apparently retaining pagan religious beliefs. The dead man is laid to rest in a shelter on the deck with the regalia of office, including a magnificent helmet and shield that show Swedish workmanship. A mound of earth is laid over the top of the vessel, and the barrow grave remains (virtually) untouched for just over 13 centuries.

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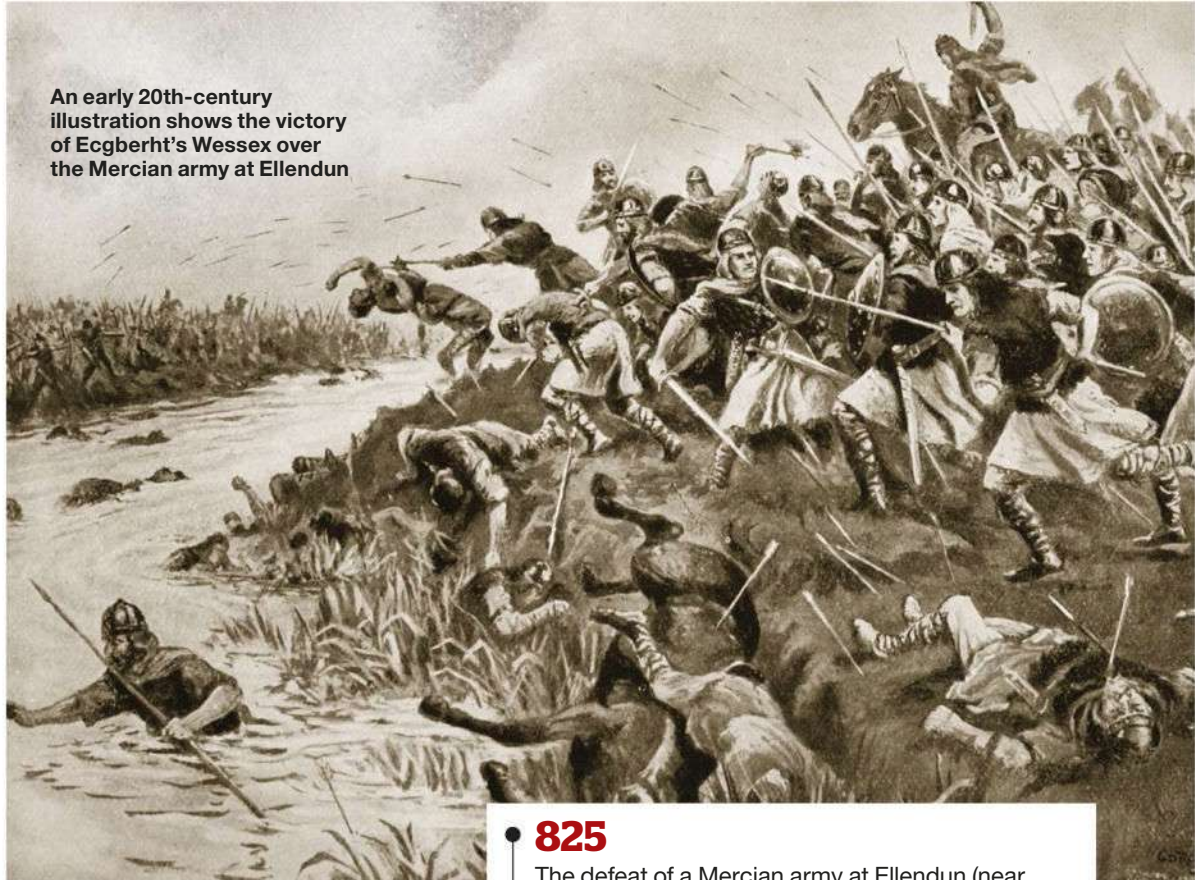
731

Writing at St Paul's Monastery in Jarrow, the Venerable Bede sets the tone for an 'English people' when he completes his manuscript *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People). Bede's work, telling the story of the conversion of the peoples of Britain, is admired and used as a model for historical writing throughout the Middle Ages. It also **gives birth to an idea of Englishness.**



A 15th-century German woodcut shows the Venerable Bede, who chronicled the early history of Christian England

An early 20th-century illustration shows the victory of Ecgberht's Wessex over the Mercian army at Ellendun



825

The defeat of a Mercian army at Ellendun (near Wroughton in Wiltshire) by King Ecgberht of Wessex leads to the **domination of the south of England by the West Saxons.** Ecgberht is able to wrest a swathe of territory, from Essex and Kent to Sussex, from Mercian overlordship.

800

787

Thirty years after seizing power in the Mercian kingdom, **King Offa secures the succession of his son, Ecgfrith.** Though Ecgfrith dies within months of his father's death in 796, Offa's reputation endures, thanks to his ruthless tactics in securing much of England between the Thames and Humber – and for the eponymous dyke he built along the Welsh border.



A penny bearing the head of King Offa of Mercia



The Lindisfarne Stone, believed to depict the first Viking raid on England in 793

793

In the earliest datable **Viking raid on the British Isles**, a group of pirates arrives at the Northumbrian island monastery of Lindisfarne and loots the church. Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon scholar at Charlemagne's court, writes of his horror at the news, telling both the community at Lindisfarne and the Northumbrian royal court that such calamities are a warning to become better Christians. More Viking raids follow.

851

A Viking army first camps overwinter in Anglo-Saxon England, on the Isle of Thanet (Kent). Subsequent campaigns by a 'Great Heathen Army', which forms and re-forms over the next two decades, show that Vikings are concerned not just with seizing treasure but could also bring long-established kingdoms to their knees as they seek land for settlement.



Viking longships crewed by the 'Great Heathen Army' land in England in a later print

Timeline

874

Leaving Norway because of a blood-feud, Ingólfr Arnarson and his foster-brother Hjørleif **sail to Iceland**. According to the Icelandic *Land-námabók* (Book of Settlements), Ingólfr casts the pillars from his old Norwegian house into the sea, declaring that he will settle where they wash up. This proves to be a bay of hot springs – Reykjavík.



Einar Jónsson's 1924 statue of pioneer Ingólfr Arnarson in Reykjavík



The English forces of Æthelstan defeat Scots, Norse-Irish and Viking warriors at Brunanburh in 937

911

Alfred's daughter **Æthelflæd assumes control of Mercia** following the death of her husband, Æthelred. The 'Lady of the Mercians' leads armies against Anglo-Scandinavian forces in the Midlands. Her death and the imprisonment of her daughter Ælfwynn by her uncle Edward 'the Elder' in 918 diverts this resurgence of Mercian power into the interests of a West Saxon kingdom.

937

An alliance of Scots, Norse-Irish and Viking forces takes a stand against the kingdom of Æthelstan (924–39), king of the English. **Æthelstan and his half-brother Edmund defeat the invaders at Brunanburh**, somewhere in north England. The battle is remembered in an Old English poem recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as well as by generations of writers across the British Isles.

900

878

King Alfred 'the Great' of Wessex (871–99) defeats a force of Vikings led by the Danish warlord Guthrum at Edington (Wiltshire). **Alfred and Guthrum agree a peace treaty** that divides the English kingdoms between Anglo-Saxons and Danes. Guthrum is baptised with the West Saxon name Æthelstan and, for a time, becomes the ruler of the East Anglian kingdom.



A 13th-century manuscript illumination depicting Alfred the Great

c911

A Viking army is granted land around Rouen, France. The army's leader, Rollo, **accepts Christianity and marries the daughter of the French king**. The settlement of the army of Northmen in what becomes Normannia (Normandy) is ostensibly to defend access to Paris but increasingly shows its independence as a powerful and influential principality on the coast of what we call the English Channel.

954

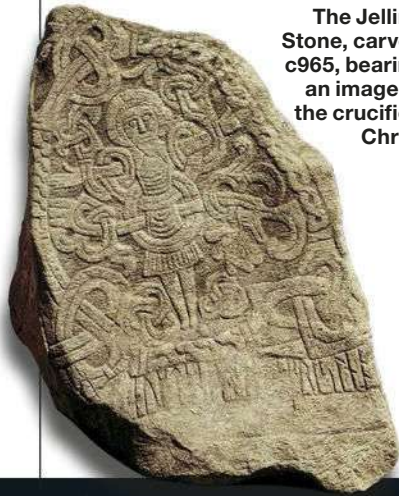
Eirik 'Bloodaxe', a Norwegian exile who took control of the Viking kingdom of York following the death of the southern English king Edmund (939–46), is driven from York by his own people and killed at Stainmore. Following his death, **York becomes part of the English realm**, no longer ruled as a separate kingdom.



The stone effigy of Rollo, first ruler of Normandy, in Rouen Cathedral is a modern copy of the 13th-century original

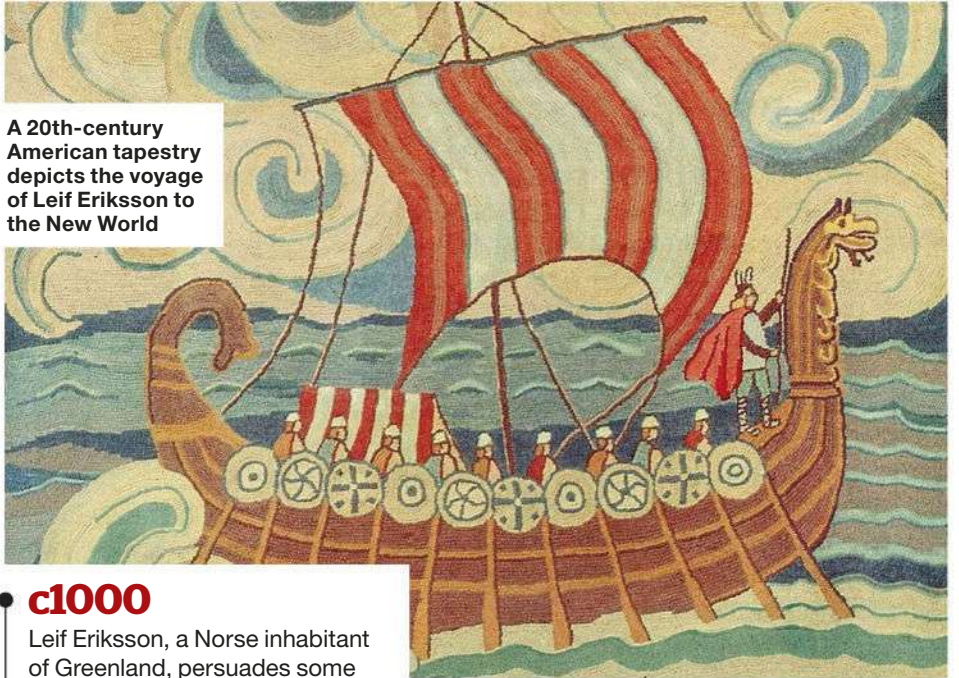
c965

Harald 'Bluetooth' erects a memorial stone at Jelling in Jutland, in the Viking kingdom of Denmark, with runes recording the memory of his father, Gorm, and mother, Thyra. The Jelling stone boasts an image of the crucified Christ and the statement that **Harald had converted all of Denmark to Christianity**, as well as a claim to control Norway.



The Jelling Stone, carved c965, bearing an image of the crucified Christ

A 20th-century American tapestry depicts the voyage of Leif Eriksson to the New World



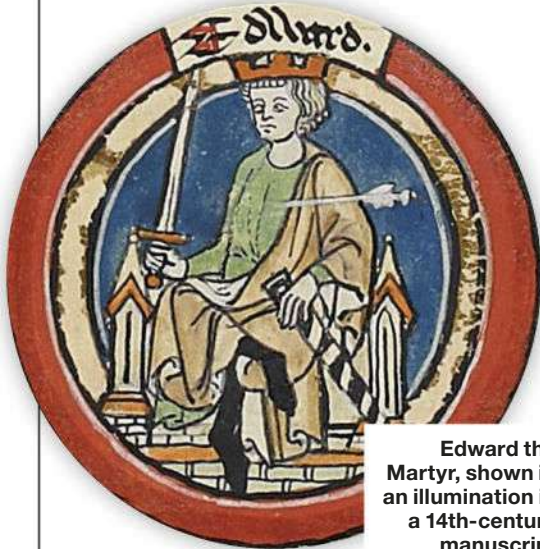
c1000

Leif Eriksson, a Norse inhabitant of Greenland, persuades some families to join him on a voyage westward to find land sighted by an earlier voyager. **Making landfall in what we now know as North America**, he names it Vinland after the wild grapes that grow there. A settlement, possibly more than one, is established but hostility from the native people leads this westernmost outpost of Viking expansion to be abandoned after only a few years.

1016

After decades of Viking raids and attempts to wrest the English kingdom from Æthelred and his son Edmund Ironside, a **peace is brokered with the Danish king Cnut**, seeing the kingdom divided once more. After Edmund's death on 30 November the Dane claims the whole kingdom, eventually ruling a North Sea empire.

1000



Edward the Martyr, shown in an illumination in a 14th-century manuscript

978

King Edward 'the Martyr' is murdered at Corfe, Dorset – perhaps, it is claimed, by his stepmother. As the perpetrators remain unpunished, some writers wonder whether the murder was a sign of God's wrath with the English.



King Harold is shown on the throne in a scene from the Bayeux Tapestry

1066

Duke William of Normandy launches an invasion of the English kingdom following the seizure of the crown by Harold Godwinson. The new king defeats Harold Hardrada of Norway at Stamford Bridge near York on 25 September, but is killed in battle with William at Hastings on 14 October. **William's victory launches the Anglo-Norman era in England.** 



WORLD OF THE ANGLO-



Trace the evolution of early England
from the influx of European tribes
to the arrival of Christianity and
tussles between rival kingdoms

SAXONS

The origins of the **ANGLO-SA**



XONS

Following the collapse of Roman Britain, German-speakers came to dominate much of the island. **Nick Higham** explores why the 'Anglo-Saxons' left their homeland and what happened to the Britons when the immigrants arrived

The Anglo-Saxon settlement, or *adventus* ('arrival') as Bede termed it in 731, has long been viewed as a turning point in Britain's history. Bede based his

account on that of the earlier British author Gildas, who lamented that his countrymen had employed 'Saxons' who then rebelled and ransacked Britain. While Gildas considered this a disaster, for Bede it was an important part of God's plan for the island, introducing His people to Britain.

Both writers saw the 'Saxons' in various ways dispossessing 'Britons', assuming that their audiences would share their own understandings of what the terms meant. Bede also distinguished between groups of incomers, claiming that the peoples of different English kingdoms descended variously from Saxons, Angles or Jutes. Though elsewhere in his work he noted that numerous continental tribes had participated in the settlement, this origins story of the English rapidly came to dominate how later generations thought about the period. Across the last half-century, though, this 'mass migration' approach has come into question as new advances in history, archaeology and place-name studies, allied to the emergence of new scientific approaches, have provided exciting new means of exploring the period.

When did the Anglo-Saxons arrive?

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede offered 449–56 as the period during which three shiploads of Angles or Saxons entered Britain at the invitation of a British ruler, Vortigern, so starting the English settlement. This is too late. A Gaulish chronicler writing probably in the 450s reported that much of Roman Britain had been won by the Saxons in 441, but this can only post-date their initial arrival.

Modern opinions have varied.

Interpretation of late-Roman pottery as indicative of Germanic settlement on the eastern English coastline in the fourth century gained support in the third quarter of the 20th century but has since been overturned. More recently it has been suggested that eastern Britain could have been German-speaking in the Roman period, but that idea finds little support in Romano-British place names.

Today it is generally recognised that an Anglo-Saxon presence is detectable soon after the ending of Roman-style government (c410), and certainly by around 420, building quite slowly over the next generation. In the second half of the fifth century there is evidence of comparatively widespread Anglo-Saxon material culture, visible in cemeteries and now to an increasing extent in settlements, predominantly east of a line from Lyme Regis

Changing faces

Anglo-Saxon carvings adorn St Mary's Church, Wirksworth, Derbyshire. Though we can pinpoint the Norman Conquest, the dates of Anglo-Saxon settlement are in question

to Sunderland. But there are gaps, even in the east, with comparatively little in and around Essex and parts of the east Midlands.

Where did they come from?

Early in his *Ecclesiastical History* Bede termed the incomers Saxons, Angles and Jutes; the Byzantine historian Procopius offered Angles and Frisians. The Saxons have their roots in northern Germany, in the region stretching from Hamburg and Hannover towards the North Sea. The Angles came primarily from Schleswig-Holstein, at the base of the Danish peninsula, the remainder of which was the home of the Jutes. The Frisians came from coastal regions of the Netherlands and nearby parts of Germany as far as Bremen.

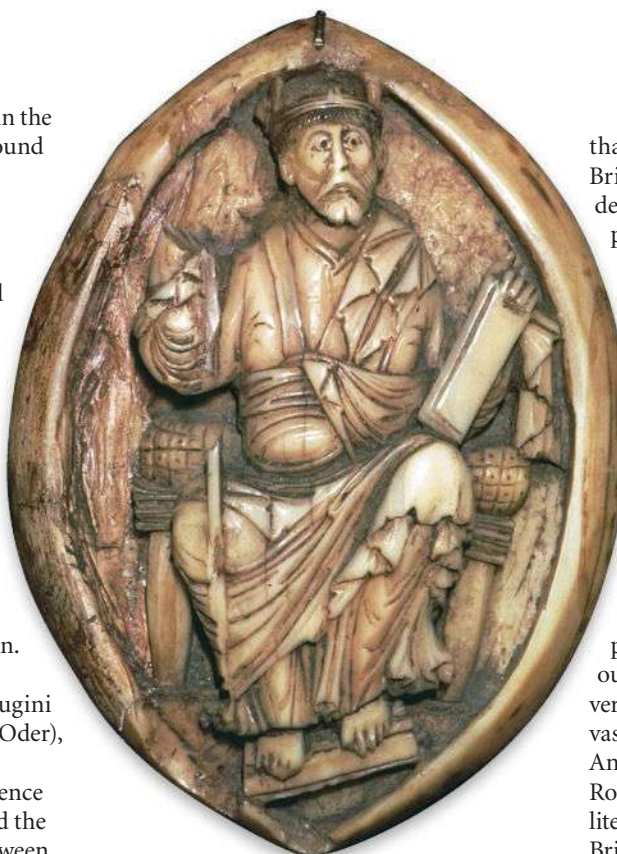
Bede later acknowledged that other peoples also contributed, naming the Rugini (a people of the Baltic coast around the Oder), the Danes (of the Danish islands and southern Sweden), the Huns (little evidence of whom has so far been uncovered) and the Boructuari (probably from the area between the Lippe and Ruhr). Excepting the Huns, archaeological evidence generally supports these connections, centring particularly on the north-west of modern Germany but also indicating links with Norway and parts of France, where there was Anglo-Saxon settlement in Lower Normandy.

It has long been recognised that typically Anglian material dominates the east Midlands and East Anglia, with Saxon in and south of the upper and lower Thames valley. To date, Jutish finds are concentrated in eastern Kent, where they give way to Frankish influence in the course of the sixth century.

Why did the Anglo-Saxons migrate?

Any number of reasons have been offered for the Anglo-Saxon influx, including both 'pull' and 'push' factors. Among the latter is marine inundation affecting coastal settlements on the eastern edge of the North Sea, many of which in this period were built on raised platforms. Additionally, the numerous tribal movements of the age of migration triggered a domino effect, pushing coastal communities to move overseas.

An important factor was clearly the collapse of Roman defences. Whereas a network of forts on either side of the Channel had deterred



An Anglo-Saxon carving from the tenth century. The 'anglicisation' of parts of Britain was probably cultural rather than confrontational

raiding from the North Sea through most of the fourth century, these garrisons were not maintained in the fifth century, allowing piratic attacks on the coasts of southern Britain and Gaul (France). While western Gaul fell to Frankish and Visigothic kings who repulsed sea raiders, post-Roman Britain had few military resources. As the Saxon Shore forts, from East Anglia to Portsmouth, fell out of use, so raiding and piracy increased.

The collapse of Roman rule offered opportunities to enterprising leaders not just to raid but also to acquire land, authority over provincial communities and tribute. British rulers may have invited Saxon mercenaries, as Gildas reported. When these rebelled they established Germanic settlements able to impose tribute on their British neighbours.

The archaeological evidence suggests that several different groups established settlements independently, perhaps first in Norfolk and eastern Kent. Whether or not they began as mercenaries, these rapidly put down roots and gained their independence. It may be

that the different provinces of late Roman Britain were each looking to their own defence and negotiating with various potential 'protectors'.

How many immigrants were there?

This question is much debated, with no clear outcome. For centuries it was assumed that a mass migration saw whole tribes from Germany arriving in Britain, clearing the land and establishing farms, much as Europeans did in the New World. Bede actually claimed that the continental homeland of the Angles was deserted, though archaeology does not entirely support this.

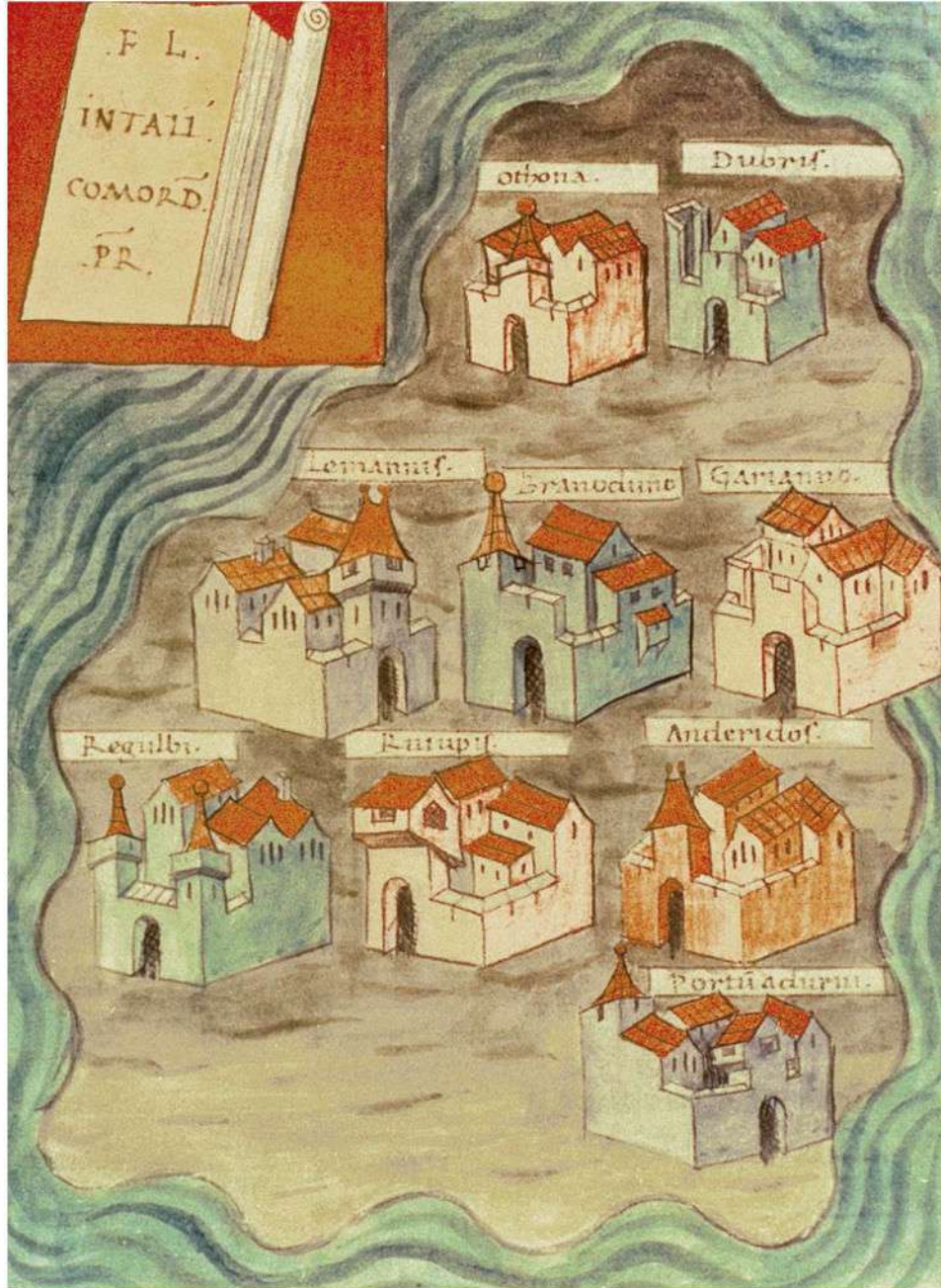
A large-scale migration has proved particularly attractive to linguists, who point out that English is a Germanic language with very few Celtic or Latin words. So, too, are the vast majority of place names in England, where Anglo-Saxon names displaced pre-existing Romano-British ones. But there is some literary evidence that suggests the presence of British individuals or communities in parts of eastern England as late as the seventh century, and archaeology is increasingly interpreted in terms of a shift from 'British' to 'Anglo-Saxon' that was as much a matter of cultural choice as migration. So we should envisage processes of 'anglicisation' alongside immigration.

It is reckoned that the population of late Roman Britain was at least 2 million. The high level of deforestation that characterised the Roman period does not seem to have been reversed, so the total farming population is unlikely to have dropped substantially in the fifth and sixth centuries. The peasantry probably largely survived, therefore, topped up by immigrants arriving across several generations and entering many different areas. Numbers of those crossing the sea can be no more than guesstimates, which vary from tens to hundreds of thousands.

Genetic studies have now begun to explore this question. Early results have shown strong links between eastern Britain and the near continent, with the far west more closely aligned with northern Spain. The most recent studies suggest that migrants in parts of the east comprised over a third of the total population. However, it is unclear when these genetic markers appeared. Did they result from colonisation after the last Ice Age, the Neolithic revolution, tribal migrations in later prehistory, the Anglo-Saxon settlement, the Viking Age, or all of these? So though we can differentiate Wales and Cornwall from England on genetic grounds, the history that lies behind those differences is debateable.

Isotopic analysis of teeth has also been attempted. This technique is capable of

"The collapse of Roman rule offered opportunities not just to raid but also to acquire land, authority and tribute"



A detail from the late fourth-century *Notitia Dignitatum* (a document detailing Roman administrative organisation). These forts were named after the enemies that they were built to defend against, before the troops left for Gaul in Constantine III's reign, never to return

establishing the environment in which the individual grew up. To date this has been small-scale, and most samples confirm that the individuals tested were born either locally or elsewhere in Britain, but analysis of 8 out of 51 skeletons excavated at Ringlemere Farm, Kent, suggested that some were born in Frisia, and associated artefacts do have strong continental affinities. This technique may, in time, begin to provide answers to some of these questions, but only a small proportion of the burials in most early cemeteries are ever likely to be identified as immigrants.

What happened to the Britons?

For centuries it was assumed that the Britons fled to Wales and Cornwall to escape the marauding Saxons, leaving their lands empty. There is some evidence for such refugees, in terms of the impact of lowlanders on the development of the Welsh language. There

was also a British migration to Armorica, which would eventually be called Brittany as a result. However, it seems increasingly likely that many British communities remained.

Surviving pre-English place names in Kent reveal evidence for Brittonic as a living language into the post-Roman period, and the distribution of the quoit-brooch style of metalworking, which originated in late-Roman workshops, is easiest interpreted as evidence of British control of south-east England below the Thames well into the fifth century. A letter from Pope Gregory suggests that Augustine found himself discussing doctrine with British clergy local to Canterbury in c600. Lincoln long remained in British hands, as did Verulamium (St Albans), with Christianity surviving at both sites. Slowly archaeologists are recognising that what they have been dating 'late Roman' does in fact extend well into the fifth century at

least, with burials in particular now being recognised in the post-Roman period at such sites as Baldock and Southwark.

Outside areas of early Anglo-Saxon settlement, British communities seem to have survived comparatively well, though many probably found themselves forced to pay tribute. In the north and west of what had been Roman Britain, British kingships developed, many of which were not overturned until the sixth or seventh centuries, and Cornwall remained under indigenous rulers up to the Viking Age. English settlement of such regions was at the level of landowners rather than farm labourers or peasants, and involved the imposition of English-style land tenure, English-speaking lordship and English ecclesiastical authority.

Even disregarding Cornwall, pre-English place names are more common in western Britain than in areas characterised by early Anglo-Saxon archaeology. This may imply that western areas were subject to a more 'political' style of 'anglicisation', later than the east, and that local populations carried more of their pre-existing cultural material with them as they crossed over from being 'British' to being 'English'.

When did the name 'Anglo-Saxon' first come into use?

We do not know what the early incomers called themselves, but the Romans and Britons termed them Saxons. The Franks, however, preferred the term Angles; this was adopted by the papacy, particularly Gregory the Great.

Bede came across both. When he wanted to talk about the entire Germanic community in Britain he used either 'Angles' or 'Angles or Saxons', but there was no uniformity of practice; his contemporary, Stephen, described St Wilfrid as "bishop of the Saxons", despite his diocese being Northumbria.

The term 'Anglo-Saxon' originated on the continent in the eighth century, when it was used to distinguish the German community in Britain from the 'Old Saxons' in northern Europe. When in the late ninth century King Alfred of Wessex extended his authority over parts of Mercia, he adopted the title 'king of the Anglo-Saxons'. This lasted into the 10th century, when his heirs also gained control of Northumbria, but it gradually fell out of use, giving way to 'king of the English'. 'Anglo-Saxon' was revived in the 16th century by scholars seeking a term by which to describe a particular period in English history. ¹¹

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WHEN THE **DARK AGES** WERE LIT UP

It's three-quarters of a century since the fabulous Anglo-Saxon burial at Sutton Hoo was unearthed. **Alex Burghart** looks back at the discovery, and explores how our knowledge of the period has expanded since 1939

This iron helmet, now on display at the British Museum, is the crowning glory of the Anglo-Saxon burial hoard discovered at Sutton Hoo in 1939

GETTY IMAGES





The ornate gold buckle from Sutton Hoo displays Frankish influences

The year 1939 saw a rare ray of light shine into the Dark Ages – one that made people realise that the Anglo-Saxon period did not deserve that gloomy moniker.

During the previous year, Edith Pretty, owner of Sutton Hoo House in Suffolk, had commissioned a local archaeologist, Basil Brown, to investigate the huge tumulus on her land. Brown did not do as he was asked. On examining it, he saw that a trench had been dug into its centre; he assumed that it had been robbed, so moved on to the smaller surrounding tumuli. Having found next to nothing in those, in 1939 he returned his attention to his original subject. He quickly unearthed rivets in rows and, as the outline of a boat slowly emerged, it became apparent that the earlier grave robbers had ceased their digging just inches short of a burial hoard of unexampled beauty.

Though the wood of the ship and the buried man's flesh had dissolved in the acidic Suffolk soil, the gold, silver and iron of his wealth remained. For the first time, historians had a chance to see the sort of objects that a great man of the seventh century had in his hall.

There was ornate war gear: a sword, an axe-hammer, a huge circular shield decorated with wild animals, a coat of mail and a collection of spears. Displays of wealth included a silver dish three-quarters of a metre in diameter, a complex buckle wrought from pure gold, and fine shoulder clasps. There was feasting equipment, too: a cauldron, drinking horns, a lyre – in short, all the man needed to live in eternity as he had on Earth. His boat was pointing west, and in his purse were 40 gold pieces – one for each of the ghostly oarsmen who would row him to the 'otherworld'.

"The treasure is a much-needed feast for the eyes in a period starved of visual aids"

The burial shows us that this corner of Suffolk was extraordinarily well connected to the world around it. Much of the craftsmanship, particularly that of the helmet and buckle, was clearly influenced by or the result of Scandinavian work. The silver dish was made in Byzantium around AD 500. The gold coins, which allow us to date the burial to the 620s or soon after, are Frankish. A bowl appears to be from Egypt. After seeing these finds it is impossible to think of early Anglo-Saxon society as being cut off from the rest of the world, or of their leaders as little Englanders. Instead we are forced to consider them as self-consciously part of a wider European society stretching from the Mediterranean to the North Sea.

Seeing the funerary magnificence of Sutton Hoo not only revealed to historians the exotic tastes of early medieval bigwigs, it also served as a reminder of how modern scholars should observe the period. To assume that seventh-century Anglo-Saxons were 'primitive' is to assume that an absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

Thinking in these terms raises important questions about the grave. The assumption has long been that the inhabitant of the mound was a king of East Anglia – probably

Rædwald, who converted to Christianity before lapsing into paganism. Who else but a king would be buried with such finery?

But, as Professor James Campbell of Oxford has argued, to assume that this is a royal burial is to ignore the fact that the tomb is almost entirely without context. It is something of a minor miracle that the spoils of Sutton Hoo remained undisturbed until the 1930s. The largest burial mounds must always have been the most alluring for grave robbers, so we should expect that these obvious, unguarded burials were interfered with at some point in the intervening centuries. The Anglo-Saxons themselves were not innocent of the crime – in *Beowulf*, the dragon who kills the eponymous hero is disturbed from his tumulus by a thief. This is to say that we cannot know exactly how prevalent burials like Sutton Hoo once were. It may be that they were not in fact very unusual.

A wealthy land?

We do not know, and have no way of knowing, how much treasure there was in seventh-century England. There may have been a great many men who had become rich from conquest and protection racketeering. There may even have been many who had access to examples of such craftsmanship – and certainly, whoever made the exquisite shoulder clasps and belt was evidently not doing it for the first time. So Sutton Hoo also acts as a reminder of how much we do not know about Anglo-Saxon history – about how we must think before we make even the shallowest assumptive leap.

But if the grave's precise status is in doubt, its uniqueness is not, and the treasure is a much-needed feast for the eyes in a period largely starved of visual aids. Though the



Ghost ship

The outline of the Sutton Hoo warrior's 27-metre-long burial ship, pointing to the west, was clearly visible after the 1939 excavation

Sutton Hoo in pictures

The artefacts discovered in 1939 helped transform our understanding of Anglo-Saxon England



◀ The helmet

Based on late Roman and Swedish models, the Sutton Hoo helmet is littered with imagery. A long snake – perhaps representing Jörmungandr, the ‘world serpent’ that circled the Earth – reaches down to touch the beak of a bird whose wings form the eyebrows and whose tail comprises the warrior’s moustache. Hidden among the rust are images of horned-helmeted and mounted warriors

Anglo-Saxons left us some manuscripts and coins, the occasional church that survived the great Norman renovations, a post-Conquest tapestry and the clutter of archaeology, compared with all subsequent eras there is not much to see. Consequently, the splendour of Sutton Hoo was immediately destined for iconic status, and publishers have been consistently keen to use the famed helmet as a cover illustration.

This one relic from Anglo-Saxon England has, in some ways, come to define the whole period. As a reminder of the centrality of militarism to the age, this is fitting but it has, perhaps, also done something to harden in the public imagination the idea that the Anglo-Saxons were nothing more than noble warriors. This is unfortunate because we now understand a great deal about the complexities and sophistication of late Anglo-Saxon

government. We know – largely because of the work of archaeologists – that, by the eighth century at the very latest, the Anglo-Saxons were much more than barbarian champions of military households.

Over the past 50 years our understanding of their economy has accelerated beyond all expectation and, as it has, we have become vastly more aware of the government machinery that exploited and regulated it. Huge numbers of coins exhumed by metal detectorists show that standardised royal coinage was circulating in Britain by the late eighth century. By the mid-10th century there was a currency of perhaps several million coins, regularly recalled and recoinced – presumably to tax, and to assure quality.

This was very much a national system. During the reign of King Edgar (ruled 959–75) it seems that few parts of England were farther

than 15 miles from a royal mint. Such clues show us how capable these kings were of centralised government, how good they were at imposing uniform standards over wide areas, and why we might describe that kingdom as a ‘state’. Thus archaeologists have unearthed evidence of a society’s progression from a world of plunder and tribute to one of toll and tax.

Anglo-Saxons ignored

Despite such rich academic discoveries, popular appreciation of the Anglo-Saxons since the Second World War has, if anything, been on the wane. The Victorians were fascinated by the origins of England and its government, and had a fondness and fascination for the state-building of Alfred the Great and his heirs. But there has been little room for the Anglo-Saxons in the modern British mindset. Whereas 19th-century



◀ Purse lid

The purse that contained the coins pictured below was presumably made of leather, which has long since rotted away. But its remarkably ornate lid of gold and cellwork plaques remains. It bears images that appear to relate to lost legend



▲ Coins and ingots

Thanks to these 40 coins and two small ingots, we are able to accurately date the treasures of Sutton Hoo. The latest coin dates to c625 AD, so the burial probably took place only a few years later. Minted by the Merovingian Franks, the coins were possibly left in the burial to pay the men who would row the dead dignitary's ship to the 'otherworld'



◀ Shoulder clasps ▲

So beautifully preserved that visitors to the British Museum often assume them to be reproductions, these shoulder clasps are among the most stunning dress items to have survived from Anglo-Saxon England. Note the intricately interwoven boars at the ends



“Archaeologists unearthed a society's progression from a world of plunder and tribute to one of toll and tax”

scholars revelled in their Teutonic past, by the mid-20th century England's German heritage evinced little pride, and the very concept of *Volk* had been sullied by history's most monstrous crimes. This intellectual back-drop meant that, as Britain became a modern nation of many peoples, so Anglo-Saxon history came to be seen as insular, primitive, misogynistic and irrelevant – to the point where the word 'medieval' became a term of abuse deployed by those who know nothing of the medieval world.

Indeed, in recent times our pre-Conquest predecessors have (along with the cross of Saint George) been co-opted by the far right, turned into symbols of a 'pure England'. This manipulation is wrong: the Anglo-Saxons were no more 'ethnically pure' than the English of today. Recognising this point reveals just how dangerous and unhelpful the rejection of parts of our history can be: dangerous because, discarded, they can be poached by the ignorant; and unhelpful because the internationalism of Anglo-Saxon times actually mirrors ours.

Anglo-Saxon culture lies behind our laws and rights, behind our system of government, behind our towns and behind the words that one in five people on Earth can understand, so it is neither nationalistic nor insular to say that we should take an interest in it.

There ought to be no room for nationalistic pride in the study and appreciation of history. We did not do these things. For many of us, these were not even the deeds of our ancestors. But they are, nonetheless, a large part of our cultural inheritance and, to an extent, that of the world. To ignore Anglo-Saxon culture is to needlessly rebury our treasure in the mound and leave it to the mercy of robbers. II

Alex Burghart is one of the authors of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (www.pase.ac.uk), a database of all known people from the period.

BEOWULF

Alex Burghart considers what we know – and don't know – about the origins of the famous Anglo-Saxon heroic epic poem

Beowulf is a tale of journeys. Journeys between kingdoms and peoples, between worlds human and monstrous, between life and death. The poem ends with its eponymous hero, mortally wounded by a fire-breathing wyrm (dragon or, rather, serpent), saying that fate had killed all his family and that now “I must follow them”.

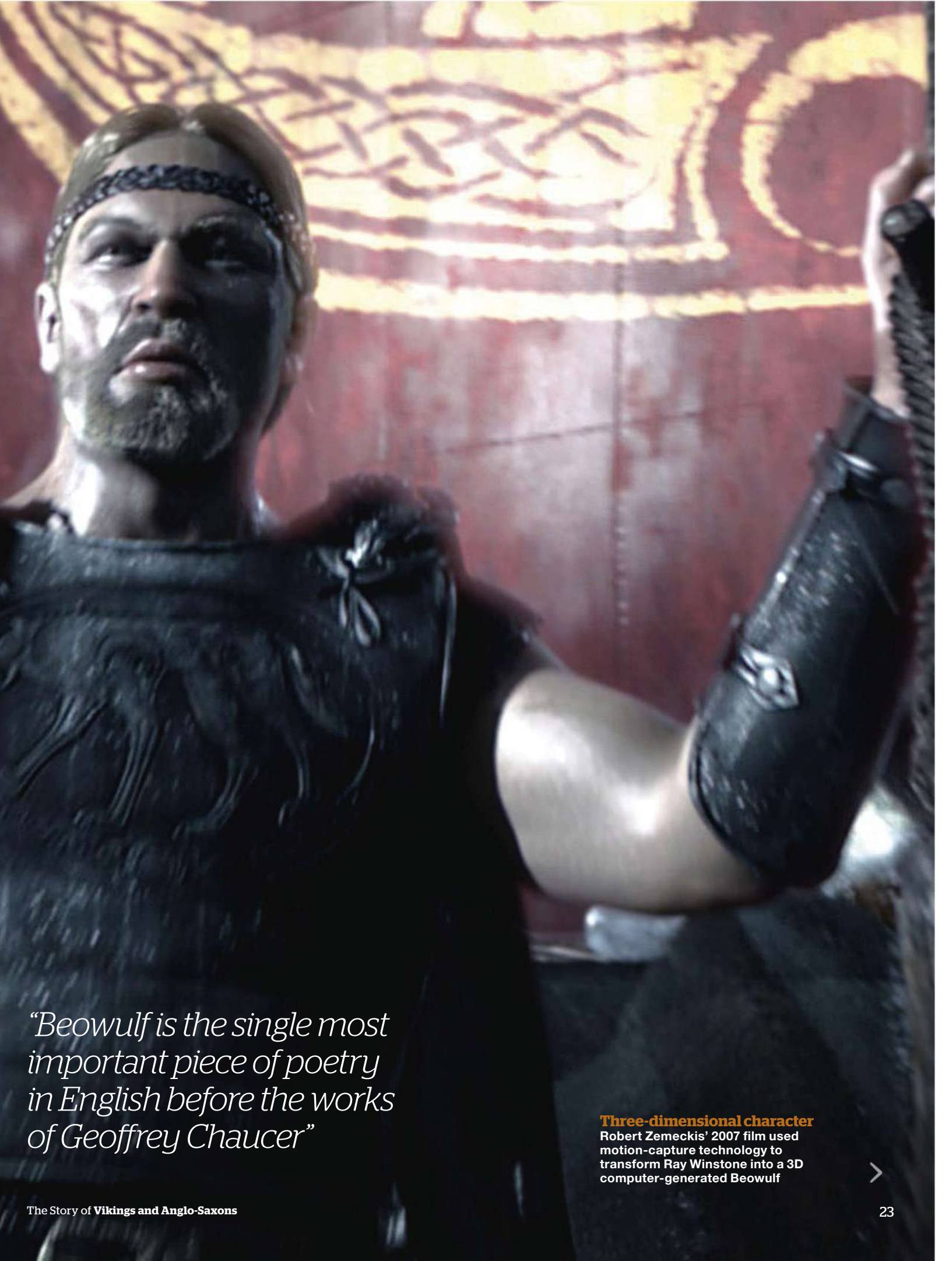
For the Anglo-Saxons the end of life was just a new beginning; for them the verb ‘to die’ was the same as ‘to go on a journey’. So with Beowulf’s death, and the story’s completion, the poem’s own journey begins, spiriting its hero down through the centuries. And on at least one occasion – hundreds of years after his unknown creator gave him life – Beowulf nearly died in flames again...

In the early hours of 23 October 1731 a fire blazed its way through Ashburnham House near Westminster Abbey, home to the collection of one of England’s most famous antiquaries, Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631). This was at the time the most important archive of medieval manuscripts in Britain. The fire engines were slow to arrive and the collection’s keepers resorted to pulling out as many books as they could by hand; one witness saw the librarian, Dr Richard Bentley, scurrying from the house with a unique fifth-century manuscript of the Greek Bible clutched to his chest. Despite their efforts, by

morning the courtyard of neighbouring Westminster School was littered with the ashes of ancient texts.

Of the 800 volumes in the library, just over a quarter were destroyed or severely damaged. Among those to escape with mere scorching was a little-appreciated tract, subsequently labelled British Library Cotton Vitellius A.xv (fols. 132–201) – better known as the epic poem *Beowulf*. The singe marks that it still bears are akin to the 17th-century grave-robber’s trench dug into the great mound at Sutton Hoo, which stopped just inches from the iconic boat-burial hoard. They are both unsettling reminders of what we nearly lost – and depressing indicators of how very much we have indeed lost.

Beowulf is the single most important piece of poetry written in English before the works of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century, a richly textured story of accomplishment and failure, of words and deeds (“worda ond worca”, as the poet has it), touching on the human condition in ways that



“Beowulf is the single most important piece of poetry in English before the works of Geoffrey Chaucer”

Three-dimensional character

Robert Zemeckis' 2007 film used motion-capture technology to transform Ray Winstone into a 3D computer-generated Beowulf

TIMELINE

An epic journey from flames to a film first



Sir Robert Cotton, famed antiquary and MP

1731: A very narrow escape

Beowulf is very nearly lost in the fire at the Cottonian Library in Ashburnham House, Westminster, which destroys more than 200 medieval manuscripts.

The document had presumably been in the possession of an English monastery dissolved by Henry VIII in the 1530s. At some point in the subsequent

30 years it passed into the possession of the antiquary and lexicographer Laurence Nowell (died c1570), then into the hands of **Sir Robert Cotton** (1571–1631), collector and MP for Huntingdonshire.

1815: The first printed edition

The Icelandic archivist **Grimur Jónsson Thorkelin**, working under commission from the Danish government, publishes the first printed edition under the subtitle: *A Danish Poem in Anglo-Saxon Dialect Concerning Danish Events of the Third and Fourth Centuries* (sic).

1837: Translated into English

The philologist (literary scholar) and historian **John Mitchell Kemble** follows up his 1834 edition of *Beowulf* – made when he was only 26 – with the **first rendering of the poem into modern English**, opening up its study to increasingly large audiences.

1936: Tolkien's acclaim

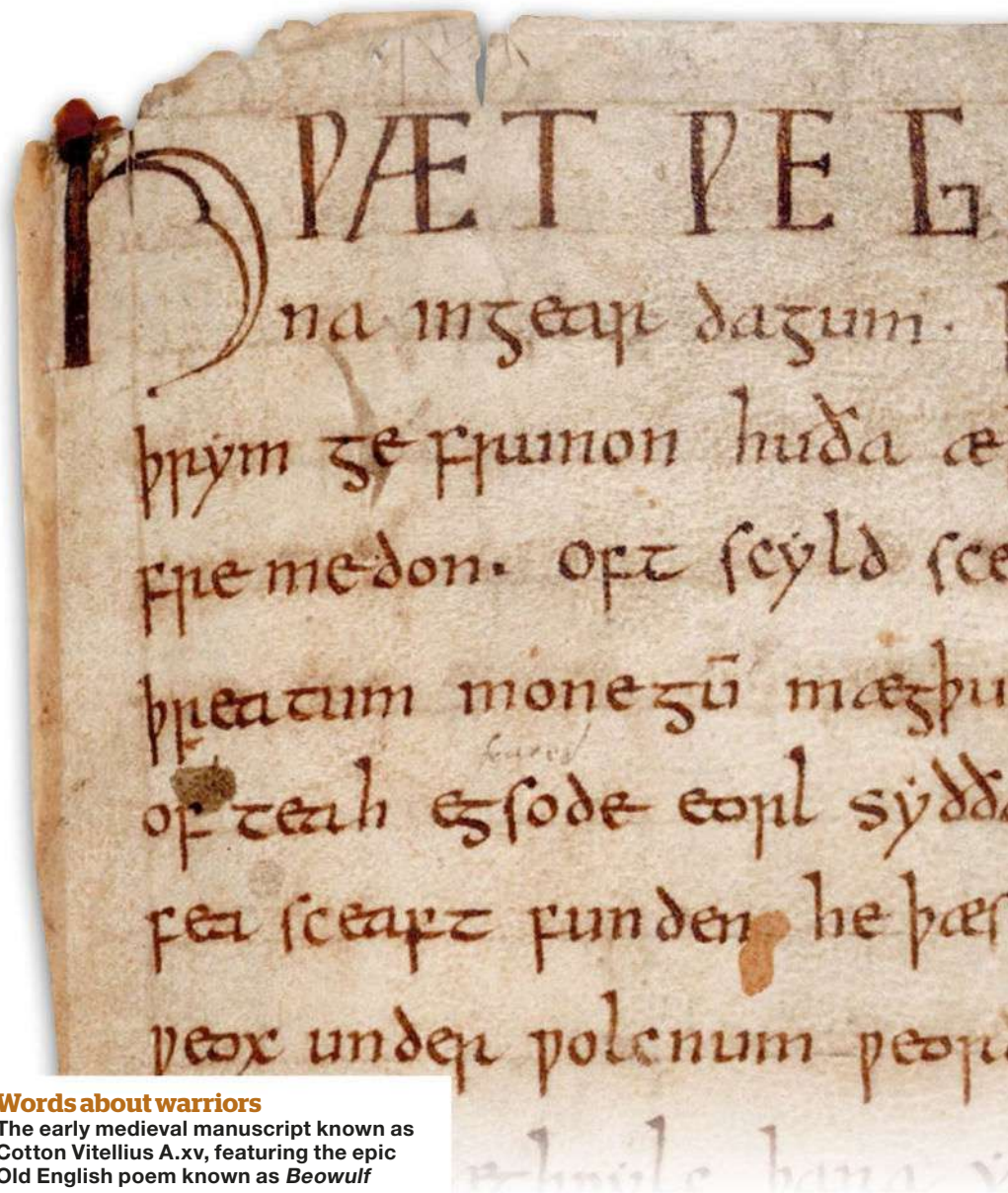
During his time as Rawlinson and Bosworth professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, **JRR Tolkien** gives his defining lecture 'Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics', to the British Academy. He argues that the poem **should be judged as a great work of literature** rather than a source of historical information for sixth-century Scandinavian royal families.



A big fan: JRR Tolkien

2007: A Beowulf for the 21st century

Robert Zemeckis directs Ray Winstone in one of the **first major films to use groundbreaking 3D motion-capture techniques**. The oldest tale in the English language is thus combined with the latest cutting-edge movie technology.



Words about warriors

The early medieval manuscript known as **Cotton Vitellius A.xv**, featuring the epic Old English poem known as *Beowulf*

make it timeless. It is, however, something of a historical enigma. Though it had presumably been in the archive of one of the many English monasteries dissolved by Henry VIII in the 16th century, its author, scribe, provenance, audience and date of composition are entirely unknown to us.

The dating game

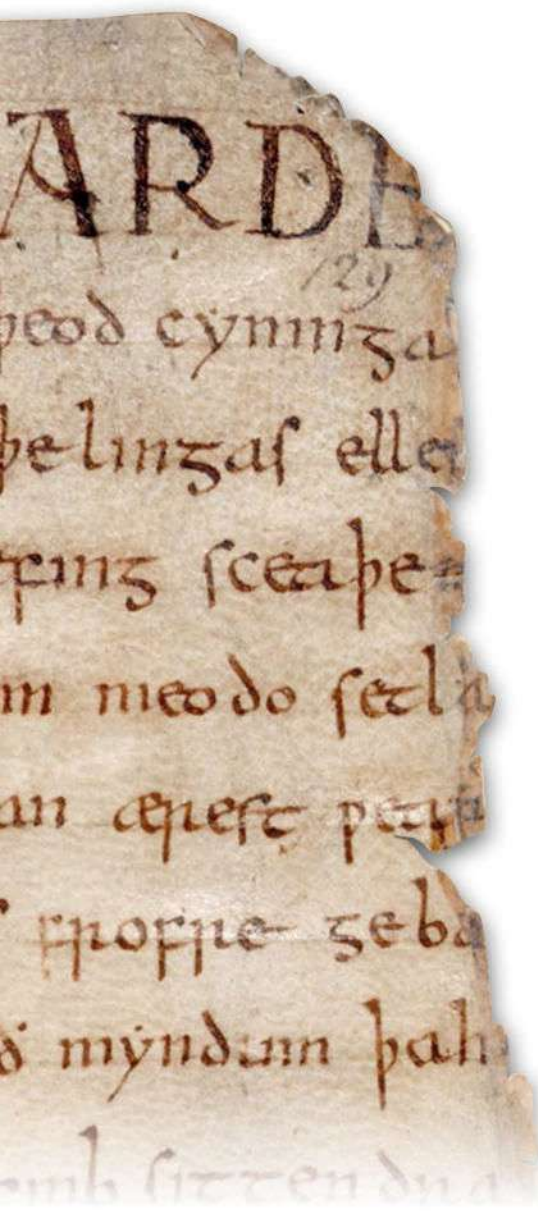
No surprise, then, that since the first printed edition of *Beowulf* appeared in the early 19th century, scholars have striven to 'pin the date on the poem'. The debate is now nearly two centuries old and provides progressively less consensus every year. Insofar as it makes any sense to try to date the slaying of two fen monsters and a treasure-guarding dragon, the events in *Beowulf* can be placed in the mid-sixth century. We are told that Beowulf's uncle was one King Hygelac of the Geats (a group of people who lived in southern Sweden), and a character of this name appears in the history of Gregory of Tours (d594) as an early sixth-century raider of Frankia.

Because the Anglo-Saxons were illiterate when pagan, the story – in its written form at

least – must date to after 597 when they began to convert to Christianity. The latest possible date is suggested by palaeographic study of the manuscript itself. By comparing the style of handwriting with that of other, more easily dated texts, it is possible to make broad assertions about when the poem was written down. This is not an exact science, but the considered opinion of learned experts is that it was produced in the years around 1000.

This rather broad date band, encompassing 400 years of Anglo-Saxon history, is about as precise as we can safely be. But medieval historians do not always err on the side of caution, and many have been brave enough to theorise more specifically.

A highly compelling case has been made by Professor Michael Lapidge of Cambridge and Notre Dame. He suggests, with practised prudence, that a possible context for the poem's world is provided by Abbot Aldhelm of Malmesbury (died c710), remembered as an unrivalled poet and performer who slipped Christian messages into vernacular tales in order to win over the laity. In places, the *Beowulf* poet does exactly the same thing.



Beowulf:

a very abridged version

Beowulf, a noble Geat, goes to help the Danish king Hrothgar whose hall, Heorot, has suffered repeated night attacks by a monster from the fens called Grendel. Beowulf tears out Grendel's arm and the monster limps off to die, only for his mother to exact revenge on Hrothgar's men. Beowulf follows her trail to a cave at the bottom of a lake where he finds and kills her. The hero returns home, is made king of the Geats and rules gloriously for 50 years until the peace of his realm is disturbed by a dragon, made angry when its treasure is disturbed. The aged Beowulf dons armour and slays the beast but is mortally wounded in the battle. The poem ends with his cremation and his man, Wiglaf, chastising the other retainers for fearing to fight the dragon, and predicting that their cowardice will soon bring ruin upon the Geat people.



Hans Schmidt's 1904 illustration of Beowulf

fenland that borders East Anglia (now in Cambridgeshire).

Most scholars have thought it unlikely that the poem, praising as it does the exploits of Scandinavians, would have been composed during the 'Viking era' of the late ninth century, when much of Britain endured attack from Danish and Norse armies. It is, of course, important not to impose our ideas on the inhabitants of the time, and it would be very dangerous to assume that all people who could write Old English thought badly of all Scandinavians.

Some harder evidence for a pre-10th-century date may have been provided by the late Patrick Wormald, who showed that a lot of personal names in *Beowulf* appear in other English sources only before the Viking invasions. However, it might still be possible that the real originators of the story were the descendants of Danish warriors who settled in England and who grew up with a good grasp of Old English and oral traditions from the homeland.

But the honest and defeatist truth is that *Beowulf* is undateable and will remain so. It is important for historians to admit that we cannot place the poem precisely within Anglo-Saxon history because, as a story of perpetual appeal, it can easily be attributed to any part of

the period. Perhaps as importantly, we do not know enough about the life of the poem, or the lives of different generations of Anglo-Saxons, to discern where it best belonged.

Instead of imagining some late ninth or early 10th-century Tolkien conjuring it up, it is probably best to think of a poet transcribing his version of an already ancient story (not unlike Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which was based on *Holinshed*, itself based on the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who may have found the story in a lost text).

Each of the stories that have become knotted together in the poem (a man wrestling impossibly powerful beasts, battling sea monsters, killing serpents) and each of its themes (feud, loyalty, bravery, generosity) is, surely, as old as humanity itself. At some point these ideas and actions, these "worda ond worca", attached themselves to a man called Beowulf – and from there the tale, like all good stories, became contagious and ever more epic. Seen like this, Cotton Vitellius A.xv is simply one incarnation in a protracted evolutionary process that began long before the poem was transcribed, and which has continued down to the present day in blockbusting 3D movies and state-of-the-art computer games, each a vessel for this enigmatic fictitious hero. **H**

Alex Burghart is one of the authors of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (www.pase.ac.uk), a database of all known people from the period.

"The honest and defeatist truth is that it is undateable and will remain so"

The rise of English Christianity

In AD 597, Saint Augustine and companions landed at Thanet in Kent to preach the gospel to the pagan Jutes. **Sarah Foot** visits the area's key sites to explore the establishment of Christianity in England

Lying at the most easterly point of Kent, the Isle of Thanet – with its sandy beaches and chalk cliffs – now seems an improbable place to search for the origins of Christianity among the English. Yet it was here in the year 597 that Roman missionaries landed and began to preach the gospel to the pagan Anglo-Saxons. The first missionaries to these shores had come in Roman times, creating a flourishing British church, but the end of Roman rule and the migration of non-Christian Germanic peoples into Britain had led the faith to decline. To the eyes of Pope Gregory the Great in Rome, Britain had once more become a pagan country.

In the Middle Ages Thanet was separated from the mainland by the Wantsum channel. In the eighth century the Wantsum was three furlongs (600 metres) wide, joined the sea at its northern and southern ends, and could be crossed at only two places. It has since silted up and is now an area of marshland, criss-crossed by drainage ditches and prone to flooding.

To the missionary monks sent by Pope Gregory, the windswept Kentish isle must have seemed a remote, desolate place. At that time the British Isles lay at the extreme edge of the known world and, as they crossed Europe toward the Channel, the monks began to have second thoughts. According to Bede, the first historian of the English, the monks wanted to go back home “rather than going to a barbarous, fierce and unbelieving nation whose language they did not even understand”.


So their leader, Augustine, leaving his companions in Gaul, returned to Rome to ask the pope if they could give up “so dangerous, wearisome, and uncertain a journey”.

Instead, Gregory resolutely sent Augustine back to his timorous charges, bolstered with advice to keep to the task they had undertaken. Where exactly Augustine and his companions landed Bede did not reveal, but it was probably on the south of the island, on the Ebbsfleet peninsula, a spit of land jutting into the Wantsum. Even in low cloud the white cliffs will have loomed over them as they approached the shore. Dragging their boats up the shallow beach, the weary travellers will have prayed that the pebbles over which they stumbled would not prove to symbolise the stony hearts of the pagans they had come to convert.

When Æthelberht, then king of Kent and the Germanic settlers known as Jutes, received a message from the missionaries, he instructed that they remain on the island until he decided what to do. The king was initially cautious because Thanet was the site of an important shrine dedicated to the Germanic pagan thunder-god Thunor, a sacred mound near Manston. The strength of the cult of Thunor among the Jutes meant that the king faced a difficult decision over which of the gods he should favour.

Æthelberht already knew something of Christianity through his wife, a Christian princess from Frankia. A few days after the monks from Rome had landed, Æthelberht crossed to the island to meet them. Wary that they might deploy magical arts, the king



A photograph of historian Sarah Foot standing in the interior of St Mary the Virgin Church in Minster-in-Thamet. She is a woman with short, curly brown hair, wearing glasses, a blue blazer over a teal top, and a necklace. She is smiling and leaning on a wooden chair. The background shows the church's architecture, including high vaulted ceilings, stone pillars, and stained glass windows.

Historian Sarah Foot admires
St Mary the Virgin Church in
Minster-in-Thamet, once the site
of a seventh-century monastery

Photography by Oliver Edwards

“The windswept
Kentish isle
must have seemed
a remote and
desolate place”

SARAH FOOT

“Wary that they might deploy magical arts, the king insisted on meeting Augustine and his companions outside”



The chalk cliffs of Pegwell Bay would have been a formidable sight for Augustine and his companions in AD 597



Norman vaulted ceilings soar above the chancel of St Mary the Virgin Church



Saint Augustine preaches to the pagan English in this modern stained-glass window in St Mary the Virgin Church

insisted on meeting outdoors. But, far from using magic, the missionaries came to him bearing a silver cross as a standard, along with a panel painted with an image of Jesus, chanting litanies and saying prayers for the salvation of their new hosts. Hearing their preaching as the gulls wheeled loudly overhead, Æthelberht agreed to let the monks spread the word of God among his people and was himself baptised. He also granted them a dwelling place in his chief city, Canterbury.

As recently as the 19th century, Kentish people believed that the site of that first meeting between Æthelberht and Augustine was marked by a massive oak, one of a group of trees fringing a field at Cliffsend in Pegwell Bay, not far from Minster-in-Thanel. In 1884, hearing the story of the felling of that great tree, the 2nd Earl Granville (then foreign secretary and lord warden of the Cinque Ports) commissioned a large standing cross that still stands at the site.

Spreading the faith

The work of evangelisation continued from the new cult centre in Canterbury, and the departure of the Roman missionaries did not end Thanet's role in the spread of the Christian faith. A great-granddaughter of Æthelberht, Eormenburh (also known as Domneva), once married to a king in the Midland kingdom of Mercia, returned to Thanet to take possession of land in compensation for the murder of her two brothers at the hands of a certain Thunor, a counsellor of the Kentish king of that time.

Medieval legends report that Eormenburh was granted as much land as her tame deer could run around, on which to found a monastery in her brothers' memory. The path the deer traced formed the boundary of the monastery's estates, lands that included the old pagan cult site 'Thunor's mound'. As the deer passed that spot, the land is said to have opened up and swallowed the evil counsellor responsible for the murders.

Minster-in-Thanel's town sign still bears the symbol of Eormenburh's white hart.

In 670 Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, consecrated Eormenburh's monastery, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, on the site of the present parish church of St Mary the Virgin, Minster-in-Thanel. This quiet spot surrounded by trees provided solitude ideal for the life of prayer, and its proximity to the sea lent opportunities to marvel at the wonders of God's creation.

The site became a thriving community of monks and nuns, led after Eormenburh's time by her daughter Mildrith (Mildred). Enjoying the benefits of a natural harbour leading into the Wantsum, the monastery owned ships and actively engaged in trade with places in the Thames estuary and on the continent.

Minster-in-Thanel lost its independence in the eighth century; for a while it was annexed to the monastery in Lyminge to the south-west. When Viking ships started to attack English shores in the ninth century, Minster-in-Thanel's exposed coastal location proved dangerous, so the nuns took refuge in Canterbury, where a community of St Mildrith survived to the 11th century.

The memory of the devotion of those first nuns is preserved today at the church of St Mary the Virgin, where modern stained glass tells some of this story. The present building, with its beautiful vaulted ceiling, was started by the Saxons and enlarged by the Normans; an older Saxon turret is incorporated into the building's Norman tower. The contemporary community of Benedictine nuns of St Mildred's Priory at nearby Minster Abbey is a living symbol of that first Christian incursion among the beaches and cliffs of Thanet. **H**

Sarah Foot is the regius professor of ecclesiastical history at Christ Church, Oxford, and author of *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England c600–900* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

EARLY CHRISTIANITY: FIVE MORE PLACES TO EXPLORE



1 St Mary the Virgin Church, Thanet

Kent, CT12 4HA

● www.wantsumchurches.org



1 Isle of Iona, Inner Hebrides

● www.welcometoiona.com

This island off the west coast of Scotland, where the Irish saint Columba founded a monastery in 563, brings us close to the experience of the earliest missionaries. The breathtaking journey by land (across Mull) and sea takes you through some of the most spectacular scenery in Scotland. From here, Saint Columba led missions to spread Christianity among the Scots in Dalriada, and the Picts in the region.

2 Lindisfarne, Northumberland

● www.lindisfarne.org.uk

The unspoiled tidal island of Lindisfarne – off the coast of Northumberland, near the Anglo-Saxon royal fortress of Bamburgh – remains a major site of pilgrimage. In 635 – at the invitation of Oswald, king of Northumbria – Aidan, a monk from Iona, established a monastery and seat of a bishop here. As well as the ruins of the monastery and a later castle, the island's quiet beaches and peaceful scenery provide plenty of opportunities to absorb the spirit of this place that attracted the Irish monks. Consult tide tables when planning a visit.

3 Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

● www.visit-burystedmunds.co.uk

A historic market town with a glorious cathedral and abbey gardens, Bury St Edmunds dates back to the early 10th century. Then called Beodricesworth, it was the site of a new monastery that was built to hold the remains of the last Christian king of East Anglia, Edmund, killed by the Vikings in 869. The abbey was one of the richest in pre-Conquest England and, until the death of Thomas Becket, it was the most popular pilgrimage site in England. The Norman bell tower (originally the entrance to the abbey) once dominated the town's skyline.



The now ruined Whitby Abbey was once home to a bustling monastic community

4 Whitby, North Yorkshire

● www.visitwhitby.com

At the top of the cliffs above the seaside town of Whitby stand the windswept ruins of the medieval monastery known as Streanæshalch (Bay of Light) in pre-Viking sources. Whitby was founded in c657 by King Oswiu, who gave his baby daughter Ælfflæd to Abbess Hilda to bring up at the abbey. The synod of Whitby in 664 determined that the Roman (not the Irish) method would be used for calculating the date of Easter. Local legend has it that the ammonites found in nearby cliffs (and for sale in the town) are the fossilised remains of snakes driven off the cliffs by Saint Hilda when she first arrived.



5 Wareham, Dorset

● www.visit-dorset.com

Wareham's riverside location between the Frome and the Piddle makes it a great place from which to explore south-eastern Dorset. The survival in Lady St Mary Church of five ancient memorial stones inscribed with British names demonstrates that this was a centre of Christianity in the seventh and eighth centuries. In the ninth century it housed an important religious foundation, it was the burial place of King Beorhtric of Wessex (died 802) and was home to a community of nuns. Though briefly occupied by a Viking army in 876, Wareham continued to host a nunnery in the 10th century and King Edward the Martyr (d978) was briefly buried here before his body was moved to the ancient hill-top market town of Shaftesbury nearby (also well worth a visit).



The dark side of the Anglo- Saxon world

If your vision of Anglo-Saxon England is a lost rural idyll inspired by the likes of *The Hobbit*, you're not alone. Yet, says **Ryan Lavelle**, the reality was far less cuddly, blighted by slavery, sexism and great social inequalities



Living the high life
This image from an 11th-century English calendar shows three high-status men drinking, flanked by four attendants. In Anglo-Saxon society, a thegn's (knight's) oath was reckoned to be worth that of six men from the lower classes

How much have Peter Jackson and JRR Tolkien influenced perceptions of Anglo-Saxon England? The New Zealand film-maker's recent three-part adaptation of Tolkien's classic children's fantasy novel *The Hobbit* enchanted audiences as much through the cosy world of Bilbo Baggins as the escapades that lead him from it. Bilbo's "hole in the ground", and the green and pleasant land of the hobbits in which it is situated – the Shire – are shown in stark contrast to the dangers of the road that leads to adventure.

The imaginary figure of the hobbit, inhabiting a comfortable corner of 'Middle-earth' (later to be defended from evil in *The Lord of the Rings*), was Tolkien's quintessential Englishman. Bilbo Baggins was portrayed as adventurous but not too adventurous, loving home comforts while able to make the best of uncomfortable surroundings, possessed of a good spirit, and ever resourceful, with a fierce loyalty where it counted.

The world through which the hobbit and his companions moved was the product of

"Where Anglo-Saxons feature in popular consciousness they are often portrayed, like hobbits, as ideal country folk"

Tolkien's deep knowledge and love of Anglo-Saxon culture. The Oxford professor of Old English shaped his fantastical landscape of Middle-earth with the myths of the northern world, such as the Old English epic *Beowulf*. But at the same time, we see Baggins leaving the comfortable surroundings of a place not unlike rural England – a place with an Anglo-Saxon name and a past, ever intruding on the present, not unlike that of Anglo-Saxon England.

The Shire was not, of course, Anglo-Saxon England. It has been observed to have sat squarely in Tolkien's own era, a mishmash of Victorian and Edwardian life, and closer to the early 20th century than the 10th.

But, at the same time, Tolkien's Shire – like his vision of England – was rural, with deep roots. This appealed to British and American audiences in the late 1930s, and

continues to do so around the world, not just to the young audience originally envisaged by Tolkien's publisher.

Imaginings of an idyllic rural age, informed by ideas of a lost medieval past, continue to make deep impressions, manifesting themselves, for example, in the vision of pre-industrial Britain realised so spectacularly in the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics. Such visions can be enchanting, and one cannot help but feel that is part of the appeal of looking at the Anglo-Saxon age. Unfortunately, from that enchantment also comes much idealisation.

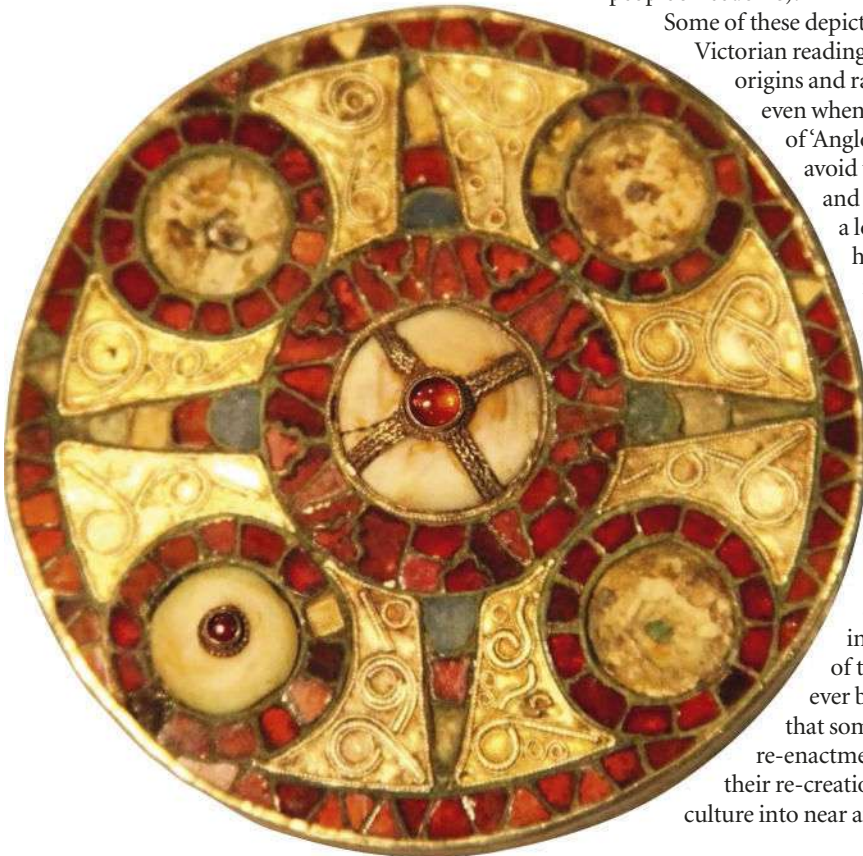
Where Anglo-Saxons feature in popular consciousness they are often portrayed, like Tolkien's hobbits, as ideal country folk: rustic ancestors from a simpler age, versed in folklore, living close to the land in a society that was



The working class Men work the land in this image from an 11th-century calendar. There was a distinct labouring class in Anglo-Saxon England; if you were born into it, that's where you'd probably stay

Anglo-Saxon status symbol

This brooch of gold, glass, garnet and shell dates from seventh-century Kent. The gulf between the richest and the rest was revealed by what they left at death



'tough but fair', and with freedoms that later generations of English men and women strove to regain throughout the later Middle Ages and early modern period. (Paradoxically, these views do not exclude the spectacular treasures of Anglo-Saxon England, so the wealth of kings is seen to sit happily alongside ordinary people's freedoms).

Some of these depictions can perpetuate Victorian readings of 'Teutonic' origins and racial supremacy but even when popular perceptions of 'Anglo-Saxon identity' avoid this, the idealism and hankering for a lost golden age show how history is often more about the ways in which we construct ourselves than about a past that is 'real'.

There is nothing new in such a realisation, of course, but idealised Anglo-Saxons are as present in 21st-century views of the past as they have ever been. Take the way that some members of re-enactment groups translate their re-creation of 'Anglo-Saxon' culture into near ancestor-worship, or

the manner in which the idealisation of the Anglo-Saxon past features in the interests of political groups – and not just those on the far right. Both cases show that an understanding of early medieval English history remains important, lest the romanticisation of the Anglo-Saxons becomes further entrenched.

And, though it's important that we understand how this romanticisation developed, it's just as vital that we acknowledge that Anglo-Saxon society was less than egalitarian. In fact, it was about as far removed from the idealised Tolkienesque landscape as Moria – Middle-earth's vast, forbidding underground complex – is different from Bilbo Baggins's Shire.

The Anglo-Saxons never were inhabitants of a rural idyll. Life in Anglo-Saxon society was tough but it was rarely fair. The Anglo-Saxons are often contrasted with their haughty Norman conquerors, but it is an irony that, on the eve of the conquest of 1066, English society was as sharply hierarchical as that of Normandy, if not more so. Arguably, it was the acquisition of great swathes of landed wealth from a handful of very wealthy English landholders that allowed even the youngest of the Norman conquerors to become, as the Anglo-Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis observed, richer than their fathers in Normandy had been.

We often concentrate on the wealth of that new class of landholders and the dizzying spectacle of their grand building projects. In doing so, we lose sight of the *nouveaux riches* of previous generations: those who had

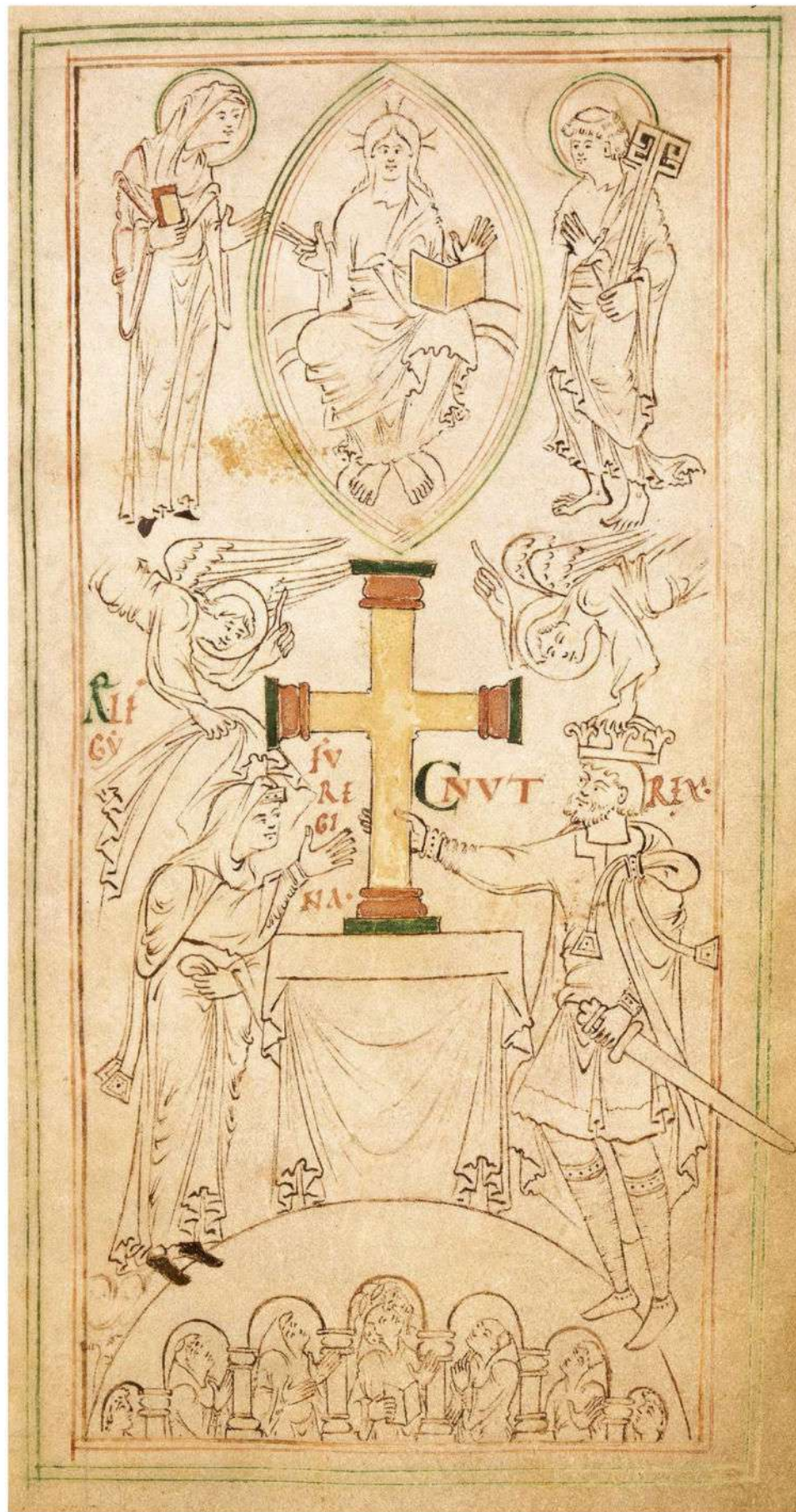


“On the eve of the Conquest, English society was as hierarchical as that of Normandy – if not more so”

accompanied and benefited from the conquest by the successful prince of Denmark, Cnut the Great, in 1016 (Danes and Anglo-Danes, but also those, such as the family of Harold Godwinson, who hailed from the English shires).

In earlier generations, there were other astoundingly rich magnates: Ælfhere, ealdorman of the Mercians; Æthelstan, ealdorman of the East Angles (later given the sobriquet ‘Half-King’); and Wulfric Spot, whose vast landholdings stretched from the Midlands to the north-west. Such figures, appearing sporadically in surviving documents (and difficult to identify due to the Anglo-Saxons’ rare use of by-names), are often forgotten now but were no less important in their own age – the decades of the 10th century prior to the height of the ‘Second Viking Age’.

The great magnates – related by degrees of kinship and, through marriage, to the royal family of the kingdom of Wessex – had flourished through their connections to one another and to a dynasty that steadily consolidated its hold over areas held by Viking



The royal and the divine This drawing in ink – taken from the *Liber Vitae* of Winchester's New Minster (1031) – shows King Cnut and his queen, Emma, presenting a cross upon the abbey's altar. Christ is seated in a mandorla, flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint Peter, while angels usher the royal couple towards the heavens



Divide and rule

A coin bearing the portrait of King Æthelstan (above), and the ninth-century Alfred Jewel (below). The society over which these two Anglo-Saxon rulers presided offered few opportunities to climb the social ladder



"Slaves made up between one-tenth and a quarter of the rural population in some areas"

lords in the Midlands and north of England during the early 10th century. Such figures as Ealdorman Ælfhere were at the forefront of the political machinations of the mid-10th century, a period that saw three different rulers in just over a decade, as well as considerable investment in religious patronage.

Despite their links with newly reformed monasteries, social elites defined themselves through their flaunting of material riches – as studies by Ann Williams of the University of East Anglia and Robin Fleming of Boston College in the US have shown.

The gulf between the super-rich and poor was evidenced by the goods that Anglo-Saxons disposed of at death in a large (for this period) body of wills from monastic archives. In life, England's nobility brandished their wealth through bodily adornments in precious silk and in jewellery, and in the vaunting of arms and armour. Little wonder, then, that their wills display an almost desperate wish to offload the riches acquired in life in order to ensure smooth entry to a heavenly hereafter. Other documents show how Anglo-Saxon authors were concerned with ensuring that people stuck to their social positions in a manner reminiscent of the 'feudal' society often associated with Norman England.

Classic medieval thinking on the 'three orders' of society – which played such an important role across high medieval Europe – had its origins in the Old English writing attributed to the court of King Alfred the Great of Wessex (reigned 871–99). Alfred oversaw the adaptation of the *Consolation of Philosophy* – a work first written by the late Roman thinker Boethius – into the English language of his court and kingdom. In a passage that is not in the original Latin version, Alfred referred to the tools available to a king. These included "praying men, fighting men, and working men". Alfred did not spell out that fighting men needed to have been affluent to do their jobs (just as the medieval knight of a later age needed a certain amount of wealth) but the implication was there: they were set apart from the labouring classes and those who fulfilled a religious role. Here was a social class – a social 'order', no less – whose position came from their specialist military role.

This was a far cry from the popular image of the defence of Alfred's West Saxon kingdom by a nation in arms – an idea that owes more to

a Victorian sense of state and nationhood than to the evidence of the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Wulfstan, archbishop of York during the reigns of Æthelred the Unready and Cnut (978–1016 and 1016–35), is the likely author of other texts on social status. Looking wistfully to a time when people knew their station, he indicates that there was room for social mobility. A free landholder could become the equivalent of a knight – a thegn – if he had "five hides of land of his own" (along with other privileges linking him to the royal court), and a merchant might do so if he had crossed the sea three times.

Evidently, if you were smart and lucky you *could* prosper, but to do so you still needed wealth and favour. And, as with so many societies, the need to make important social connections – at best with the royal household or at least with the household of someone at court – lay at the heart of the aspiration.

State of servitude

But what of those at the very bottom of the social ladder: slaves? Slavery flourished throughout the early Middle Ages, thanks to the raiding activities practised by Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. And the slave trade wasn't confined to times of war – the famines that blighted the country all too regularly in peacetime were just as likely to drive free people to selling themselves or family members into slavery.

Slaves *were* freed regularly – in the terminology of the day, 'manumitted' – for the sake of the souls of their owners. Yet this didn't give slaves much realistic hope of achieving earthly redemption for themselves. In fact, in a society that denied thousands of its members the right to legally own property, and forced them to do the dirtiest of jobs, such manumissions were a drop in the ocean. In Domesday Book, by far the most detailed record of the Anglo-Saxon economy, slaves were recorded as making up between one-tenth and a quarter of the rural population in some areas, especially in the west of England.

Precise assessments are impossible because of the ways in which Domesday Book was compiled, leading to such errors as the assumption that northern 'Anglo-Scandinavian' society was in some ways 'freer' than the south. It may be that some people were called slaves because they did particular tasks, such as ploughing, on a lord's land, while other agricultural workers, known by titles such



Regime change

This illustration shows “the oppression of the English by Cnut’s army”. Cnut’s invasion in 1016 benefited some who became the *nouveaux riches* of their day

as *coliberti* or *bordarii*, lived in similarly oppressed states.

Nonetheless, Domesday Book does reveal the significance of slavery. And we know from other sources that slaves ran away – Archbishop Wulfstan complained that at the times of Viking raids slaves might join Viking war bands – and might be fettered.

From nuggets of evidence of a social class who made little impression on records, we can deduce that life for a slave was harsh. We therefore cannot talk of social equality within an early medieval society when so many members of that society were deemed to have been legally unfree, incapable of raising their position.

Yet slaves weren’t the only section of the population facing huge inequalities in Anglo-Saxon society. It seems that injustice and inequality were also a fact of everyday life for women.

The Anglo-Saxon period is often seen as a golden age for women, especially in light of the enforced marriages to widows that took place after the Norman conquest.

Many Anglo-Saxon wills are those of women, suggesting that female property-owning was widespread. What’s more, historians have held up Æthelflæd, ‘Lady of the Mercians’ and King Alfred’s daughter, as an example of a powerful Anglo-Saxon political woman, because she ruled territory and won wars in her own right. However, she was an exception.

A woman’s status in law remained that of her father or husband and, though there were legal protections for the disposal of property for women, its control within a family often appears to have been influenced by male family members. It was no coincidence that the Norman conquerors forcibly married English widows after 1066. Though allowing for escape



Weapon of the warring class

This exquisitely decorated sword (c875) was discovered near Abingdon (now in Oxfordshire) in 1875. In King Alfred’s time, fighting men were set apart from the labouring and religious classes – and they were expected to be wealthy

from forced marriage, English law did not consistently prohibit such marriage, suggesting that social pressures often determined a woman’s fate.

And it is in law that the disparities in Anglo-Saxon society become most apparent. The *ceorl* (the lowest of ‘free men’) is often held up as a figure representative of English freedoms. A free man holding or even owning his own property is seen as the foundation of respectable Anglo-Saxon society. Such people had political voices at a local level, and could even appeal to the king (or at least his agents) – but the basis on which this happened was not free or fair, and was certainly not meritocratic.

The ‘big men’ within local society had law on their side, as their legal protection (their ‘man-price’ or *wer-geld*) differed substantially,

Tolkien and the Anglo-Saxons

How Middle-earth evoked early medieval folklore – and reality

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was Rawlinson and Bosworth professor of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) at Oxford University from 1925 until his retirement in 1959, during which time the books for which he is most well known, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, were published. A lifelong reader of ancient and medieval languages and literature, Tolkien (1892–1973) displayed these interests in his studies and his fiction.

The publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937 brought the author's creation of a fantasy world of 'Middle-earth' to life. Part of its success lay in the fact that its characters inhabited a place that could seem very real. Tolkien hadn't just created a back-story for his characters – he'd placed them in a complete world. The figure of the hobbit, a short, human-like character, possessed of very English attributes, was new for the story but the figure is used to take the reader on a journey through a landscape that was both real and unreal. *The Hobbit* introduced readers to a world that Tolkien had been working on since before the First World War.

Tolkien's posthumously published works established the creation, legends and histories of the peoples who inhabited Middle-earth, and it is in the depth of detail that Tolkien – the specialist in language and literature – excels.

Drawing on his experience as a professor of Old English, Tolkien borrowed heavily from western European medieval cultures; Tolkien's Middle-earth is redolent with references to them – not least in its name, which was a direct borrowing of the Old English term for the earthly realm: *middangeard*.

As was the case for the inhabitants of a medieval world, the landscape is one in which the historic past and legend, the connections between protagonists and their ancestors' deeds, is ever present: through barrows bearing dead rulers, artefacts (including an engraved ring), and the songs and poems associated with particular places.

The quasi-Celtic elves, for whom Tolkien developed entire languages, probably have the greatest impact upon the shape and tone of his books and the recent film adaptations. The reader's (and viewer's) perception of elves is often filtered through the wonderment of the hobbits who encounter them, showing Tolkien's consciousness of the Anglo-Saxons' own sense of an elven world that was both 'other' and near at hand.

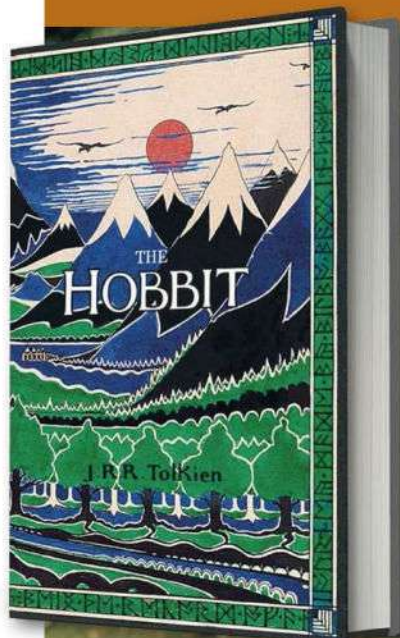
However, if the hobbit represents stolid rural England, the Men of Rohan, first



Martin Freeman plays Bilbo Baggins in Peter Jackson's latest film trilogy, based on *The Hobbit*

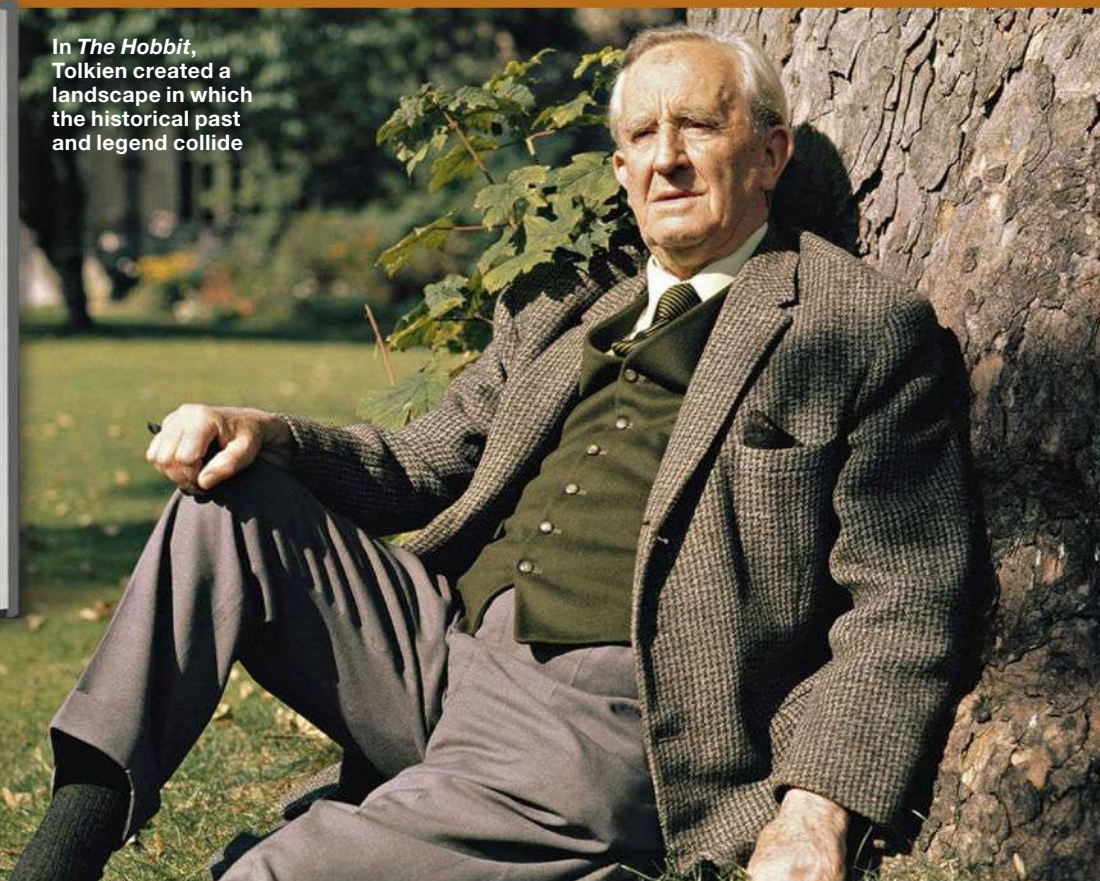
encountered in Tolkien's *The Two Towers* (second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*), reflect the values of an Anglo-Saxon martial culture. Tolkien's description of a hall ruled over by a king held in thrall to an evil counsellor could have come straight from Anglo-Saxon literature. Indeed, in many ways it did.

Tolkien's references to Anglo-Saxon culture wove folklore and fact into a plausible reality – one which, as one commentator has pointed out, was a reconstruction of a world that had "once really existed, at least in a collective imagination". In doing so, they showed the other-worldliness of a historic past that made generations of readers appreciate the realities of a living landscape.



In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien created a landscape in which the historical past and legend collide

Tolkien, pictured in Oxford in 1972, infused his novels with his love of medieval literature



CAMERA PRESS/ALAMY



Inspired artwork The Franks Casket, which was carved from whalebone in the north of England in the eighth century. Its artwork is inspired by the Bible, Germanic legend and the Roman empire

“The legacy of the idea of a lost golden age remains a presence in our society”

as did the value of their word. In one legal text on Mercian law, the oath of a thegn was reckoned to be worth that of six men of lower status, meaning that a thegn, likely to be a local bigwig, had far greater influence in law. Despite these inequalities, the foundations of English law can be traced to the early medieval period. It may have differed in West Saxon, Mercian and Northumbrian areas (the latter being that most densely settled by Scandinavians) but legal representation was, nonetheless, available.

This mattered to later generations. Twelfth-century authors such as Henry of Huntingdon and Orderic Vitalis, despite their Norman links, bemoaned the loss of land and freedom thought to have been possessed by the Anglo-Saxons. But it was in the 16th and 17th centuries, with historical debates on absolutism and (contrary to the evidence) a sense that the Anglo-Saxons had been separate from the Roman church, that an awareness of the power of the Anglo-Saxon past became a powerful force.

Some authors, such as the 17th-century Cambridge historian Isaac Dorislaus, used the idea of ‘Saxon’ England’s Germanic links to

emphasise the democratic freedoms thought to have been enjoyed in the pre-Conquest past. Such ideas, considered seditious by many, fed into the cauldron of political radicalism from which the Civil War emerged.

The key belief was that the Anglo-Saxon freedoms had been taken away and a ‘Norman Yoke’ imposed, and that the English people were still subjugated by despotic monarchs. The desire of more radical thinkers, such as the Leveller John Lilburne, to get back to a golden age was also not far from the surface. The Norman oppression of the freeborn Englishman was cited frequently during the Civil War and its aftermath.

The legacy of the idea of a lost golden age and Norman oppression has remained a presence in British and indeed American society. Whigs and liberals in the 18th and 19th centuries loved what they saw as the constitutional monarchy of King Alfred, for example, and though the interest in Germanic culture dipped following the outbreak of the First World War, the sense of the Englishman defending his home soil continued to have resonance during the 20th century.

Across the Atlantic, Americans regarded the constitutional freedoms set out by the Founding Fathers as a renewal of ancient liberties enjoyed by ‘Teutonic’ ancestors, no longer sullied by an association with Norman monarchical despotism.


With so many levels of association to unpick, it is little wonder that our relationship with the Anglo-Saxons remains complex. Though it is unfair to treat Tolkien’s interpretations as historical, let alone socio-historical, one little hobbit’s appearance on a big screen has nevertheless added another layer to the Anglo-Saxons’ saga. Like his previous *Lord of the Rings* films, Peter Jackson’s vision of Middle-earth in *The Hobbit* trilogy has been informed, like Tolkien’s, by a web of fantasy, history and legend.

As new generations of scholars come to the study of the early medieval past through viewing these films and their predecessors, they will have already encountered much that will be familiar to them. That can only be a boon in bringing people to the rich seams of culture found in the study of Anglo-Saxon England and its neighbours. But it should not be allowed to overshadow the grittier realities of a period that was by no means a ‘golden age’. **H**

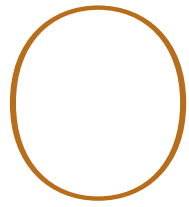
Ryan Lavelle is reader in early medieval history at the University of Winchester, and author of books on the age including *Alfred’s Wars* (Boydell, 2010)

The Anglo-Saxon who (almost) united Britain

In AD 675, the Northumbrian ruler Ecgrith was so powerful that he effectively made himself high-king of Britain. **Nick Higham** introduces a true heavyweight of early English history



An illustration from Bede's *The Life of Saint Cuthbert* shows Ecgrith visiting Saint Cuthbert at Lindisfarne. For a time, the Northumbrian monarch was the king of kings across virtually all of Britain, from the Scottish Highlands in the north to Sussex in the south



n Saturday 20 May AD 685, Saint Cuthbert was with Northumbria's queen Iurmenburh at Carlisle when he had a vision of her husband, Ecgfrith, dying at the

hands of the Picts. A few days later, "they heard that it was announced far and wide that a wretched and lamentable battle had taken place at the very day and hour it was revealed to him".

Ecgfrith was dead, and the flower of his army had fallen. For Northumbria, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom that spanned much of what is now northern England and southern Scotland, it was a fateful day. Bede, the English monk and author, later quoted from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "The hope and valour of the realm of the English began 'to ebb and flow away'." The Picts recovered lands previously taken from them, and the Scots and northern Britons threw off English overlordship. The Northumbrians' dream of exercising power across all of Britain was finally extinguished.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, Britain was a world of small kingships. Minor rulers found it necessary to look to more powerful kings for protection. The resulting regional kingships could be volatile and short-term but – thanks to a combination of dynastic alliances, Christian missions, raids and wars, sometimes pursued over considerable distances – a pattern of larger kingdoms slowly emerged, absorbing smaller neighbours.

Occasionally, in the seventh century, the most successful rulers established a Britain-wide, 'over-' or 'high-kingship' – by which every local or regional king in the whole island recognised the superiority of just one man. It was while trying to attain this supreme power that Ecgfrith lost his life in 685.

Imperial rule

Of course, the idea of an overall authority across Britain (attempted, if not realised) stems ultimately from the ancient Romans, whose emperors were later understood locally as high-kings ruling over British kings. This notion of a high-kingship was developed by Bede, who employed the word *imperium* in reference to both Roman and English supremacies.

Bede listed seven kings who had *imperium* south of the Humber, the last three of whom were Northumbrians – Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu – whose power was centred farther north. These, Bede tells us, had greater power. Edwin achieved authority over Anglesey and Man. Oswald ruled "within the same bounds"



A portrait of Æthelthryth, the queen who refused to consummate her marriage with Ecgfrith

"It was while trying to attain supreme power – a Britain-wide 'high-kingship' – that Ecgfrith lost his life in 685"

in this list, but Bede later claimed for him authority over all peoples speaking English, Welsh, Scottish and Pictish.

Finally, Oswiu additionally "overwhelmed and made tributary the greater part of the peoples of the Picts and Scots who inhabit the northern limits of Britain". We can certainly see Oswiu as all-powerful in the years after 655, when he defeated the Mercians and took over much of the English Midlands. He also seized Fife in Scotland, becoming overlord of the northern kings beyond.

Bede visualised a progression, therefore, from 'over-kingship' of the south to a Northumbrian 'high-kingship' of all Britain. The subordination of all the other peoples of Britain to the (Northumbrian) English was, in Bede's view, God's plan for the island.

The one high-king omitted from Bede's list was Ecgfrith, Oswiu's son and heir, and a king who has not perhaps received as much attention as he deserves. He came to the throne of the Northumbrians aged about 25, following his father's death in 670.

An almost immediate challenge came from his father's erstwhile northern tributaries: the Picts rose against him, seeking to throw off English overlordship and recapture the Pictish territory that Oswiu had taken under

Northumbrian rule. Ecgfrith may have been new to the throne but he was more than equal to the Picts' challenge. He marched north and won an overwhelming victory against them, reimposing tribute, confirming his hold on Fife and instigating regime change.

At home, though, Ecgfrith was experiencing serious difficulties. At the root of his problems was a split in the Northumbrian church. On one side were the majority of the clergy, who had been trained within the Scottish tradition (centred on Lindisfarne, Melrose and Whitby) but had conformed to the Roman dating of Easter in 664. On the other side of the divide was Bishop Wilfrid, who had adopted the view circulating at Rome that British and Scottish churches were heretical, and was now moving energetically against British priests within Northumbria, expelling them by force of arms.

The religious life

Such tensions within the church cannot have made life easy for Ecgfrith. Nor could the fact that his wife of 12 years, Æthelthryth, an East Anglian princess who was probably older than the king, had consistently refused to consummate their marriage. Ecgfrith finally gave way and, around 672, allowed Æthelthryth to retire to the religious life. She went on to found a nunnery at Ely and took up its rule in 673.

On the face of it, the loss of a wife was a major setback. Yet it appears that Ecgfrith was able to turn this to his advantage. For, with Æthelthryth in her Ely retreat, Ecgfrith was free to marry again – and his next match, with Iurmenburh (probably a member of the Kentish royal household), helped secure him a vital alliance that greatly extended his influence in the south.

But where there are winners, there are inevitably losers. And in this case the losers were the Mercians, who saw their influence in the south wane as Ecgfrith's grew and grew. Their response was to raise a great army against him in 674. Once again, Ecgfrith emerged triumphant, defeating the Mercians in battle and forcing them to cede Lindsey (broadly, Lincolnshire) and pay tribute. When the Mercian king, Wulfhere, died in 675, he was succeeded by his brother, Æthelred, whom Ecgfrith had married off to his own sister – probably as part of the peace arrangements.

Ecgfrith's victory over the Mercians marks the high-water mark of his reign. In fact, in 675 it would be no exaggeration to describe him – like his father, Oswiu, at Christmas 655 – as the high-king of Britain. Had his



Historians have traditionally believed that this Pictish carved stone – from Aberlemno in Angus – depicts the battle of Dun Nechtain in 685, at which the Picts ambushed a Northumbrian army and killed King Ecgrith (though some suggest that it portrays a different clash)

brother-in-law on the Mercian throne played ball, then Ecgrith's position might have become embedded.

Unfortunately for Ecgrith, the Mercians weren't prepared to take the loss of Lindsey and the waning of their influence across the south lying down. In 676 they struck back, devastating Kent and effectively asserting their independence of Northumbrian overlordship. Just as significantly, they exposed Ecgrith's inability to protect his southern allies.

Worse still, the situation in the north was also deteriorating. The evidence is poor and often ambiguous, but an alliance hostile to the high-king's interests seems to have developed between the northern Britons on the Clyde, his cousin King Bruide of the Picts and the Irish high-king, Finsnechta Fledach, king of Brega.

Such formidable opposition forced Ecgrith to take a more conciliatory stance towards Scottish Christianity. He could no longer afford Bishop Wilfrid's hostility towards those who had been trained within that tradition, so he expelled Wilfrid in 678 and resisted all subsequent papal pressures to reinstate him. Ecgrith turned instead to the Northumbrian clergy who had initially been educated and advanced within the Scottish church but had accepted Oswiu's Catholic reformation in 664.

He also saw to it that candidates from this faction were appointed to new bishoprics. The last bishop whose appointment Ecgrith engineered was Saint Cuthbert, who represented the final flowering of the

The north rises Three maps showing Northumbria's growing pre-eminence in the 7th century



1 The expansion of Bernicia, under Ecgrith's grandfather, Aethelfrith



2 The high-kingship of Ecgrith's father, Oswiu, at its zenith (655-58)



3 The high-kingship of Ecgrith in AD 675

“Northumbria’s kings were the only rulers to exercise power universally across Britain before the 10th century”



This sixth or seventh-century Anglo-Saxon gold pendant was discovered in Kent, which formed an alliance with Northumbria in the 670s

tradition of preaching and asceticism established by the Scottish missionaries to Northumbria in the 630s.

Yet such moves didn’t pacify Ecgriffrith’s enemies in the south. In 679, Æthelred’s Mercians defeated him in a battle on the Trent, killing his brother, Ælfwine. Peace was restored by Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, but Lindsey was returned to the Mercians, who were now clearly dominant south of the Humber. Ecgriffrith’s attention turned to the north, and how to best re-impose his supremacy there.

Ecgriffrith responded by founding Jarrow, probably with the intention of regaining God’s support. The risk of further attacks by Mercia probably kept Ecgriffrith close to his southern borders over the next few campaigning seasons but he successfully despatched a force to ravage the Irish territory of his opponents in 684 – the only Anglo-Saxon king ever to send forces across the Irish Sea.

Killed in battle

In 685, political upheavals among the South Saxons and then the West Saxons reduced the risk of a Mercian attack, allowing Ecgriffrith to go on the offensive again, this time launching a lightning strike against the Picts. But this was to be his last throw of the dice for, as we’ve seen, on 20 May at the battle of Dun Nechtain he was ambushed by the very Picts he was trying to bring low, far to the north in the Scottish Highlands. We know very little of the battle beyond the outcome, which was a Northumbrian disaster.

In the crisis that followed, the Picts overwhelmed Fife, and its Catholic bishop had to abandon his see. Aldfrith, an illegitimate, half-Irish brother of Ecgriffrith, took the throne and continued Ecgriffrith’s religious policies, but he was a middle-aged scholar and no warrior.

Aldfrith never attempted dominance of Britain, either north or south of Northumbria. Instead he settled for an alliance with the West Saxons to try to contain Mercia, and made the most of his close friendships with the Irish to retain a degree of influence among the Celtic courts of the north.

Northumbria’s glory days were over, and with them any chance that a single king would attain universal superiority across Britain.

Had Ecgriffrith won his battle against the Picts, and turned once more against the Mercians, might the pattern of history have been different? It is possible that Britain could have been welded into a single political unit under Northumbria’s kings across the late seventh and eighth centuries. To do this, though, they needed to secure permanent control of Mercia, establishing a single realm from the Thames to the Firth of Forth and beyond.

They enjoyed temporary successes, but never for long enough for their power to take root. Instead, Northumbria’s kings often found themselves engaged on two fronts, to north and south, unable to deal effectively with either.

Despite this, Northumbria’s seventh-century kings were the only rulers to exercise even intermittent power universally across Britain before the 10th century, and their achievements should be recognised. Had they achieved lasting success, then the division that we see today between Scotland, England and Wales would probably be very different indeed. **H**

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High, but how mighty?

How close did Ecgriffrith’s fellow Northumbrian high-kings come to uniting Britain?

Æthelfrith (Ecgriffrith’s paternal grandfather) should be viewed as the founder of Northumbria. He came to prominence as king of the Bernicians in northern Northumbria c592, but expanded his rule dramatically by waging war against the neighbouring British kingdoms, and by imposing himself on Deira (basically Yorkshire). He also fought off an attack by the Scots of Dál Riata, then marched against the Welsh and won the battle of Chester around 615.

Edwin (Ecgriffrith’s maternal grandfather) was king of Northumbria 616–33. He was initially placed on the throne by East Anglian backers but from c626 onwards he was the most powerful king in Britain. He defeated the West Saxons and the Welsh, and took control of Anglesey and Man. Conversion to Roman Christianity provided him with an important source of soft power, and his marriage allied him with Kent. He died in battle fighting the Welsh and Mercians.

Oswald (Ecgriffrith’s paternal uncle) was king of Northumbria c634/35–42. He was Æthelfrith’s son, obtaining power through victory over the Welsh king Cædwalla. A marriage alliance with Wessex stabilised his ‘over-kingship’ in the south, while disastrous defeat suffered by the Scots in Ireland probably allowed Oswald (shown left) to extend his high-kingship across the north and take direct control of the Lothians. He was defeated and killed “treacherously” by the Mercians.



Oswiu (Ecgriffrith’s father) was king of Bernicia from 642 and of all Northumbria 655–70. He used his patronage of Scottish Christianity to expand his influence into the south-east Midlands and Essex but had to retreat right up to the Firth of Forth in 655 in the face of a massive Mercian-led invasion. The invaders were defeated and mostly slain on the river Went near Doncaster in late autumn as they returned home, allowing Oswiu to emerge as high-king of Britain.

Though his attempt to take over Mercia ultimately failed, Oswiu did expand Northumbria northwards into Fife and established his over-lordship across the north.

OFFA

BEYOND THE DYKE

Offa's great dyke can still be seen along the Welsh border, more than 1,250 years after he came to power. **Sarah Foot** reappraises a violent Anglo-Saxon king who was also a European statesman and a Christian reformer

King Offa, depicted in the c1380 Benefactors' Book of St Albans Abbey, which he founded in 793

The background shows the view across the Vale of Clywd from Offa's Dyke at Moel Arthur in north Wales

The 30th year in power of Offa, king of the Mercians from AD 757 to 796, was one of the most momentous of his reign. An extract from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 787 outlines the situation:

In this year there was a contentious synod at Chelsea, and Archbishop Jænberht lost a certain part of his province, and Hygeberht was chosen by King Offa. And Ecgrith was consecrated king.

Behind this brief report lie not just heated debates in a church council, but also negotiations with the papacy, a visit from two papal legates bent on reforming the English church and society, and a developing relationship between Offa and Charlemagne (Charles the Great), his counterpart in the kingdom of Frankia (modern France and Germany west of the Rhine). Charlemagne, who would be crowned emperor by the pope in 800, was the most powerful ruler in western Europe.

As the chronicle indicates, Archbishop Jænberht lost his authority over the Midland sees between the Thames and the Humber to the newly promoted Hygeberht of Lichfield, the bishopric nearest to Offa's chief residence at Tamworth. Offa needed a compliant archbishop to anoint his son, Ecgrith, with holy oil, following the precedent set by the Carolingians (the kings of Frankia).

It is no coincidence that one chapter of the legates' report to Pope Hadrian asserted that only the legitimately born might be "the Lord's anointed and king of the whole kingdom and inheritor of the land", and declared – yet more portentously – "Let no one dare to conspire to kill a king, for he is the Lord's anointed."

Offa's reign presents us with a paradox. For beside the ruler active on a European stage, whom Charlemagne addressed as "dearest brother", we see domestically a ruthless and often violent oppressor. A laconic entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 794 is typical: "In this year, Offa, king of the Mercians had Æthelberht [king of the East Angles] beheaded." Which image best reflects this king who came to power over 1,250 years ago? The bloodthirsty tyrant or the Christian



Offa's sense of his own power is reflected in his portrait coinage

"Offa's use of fear and violence was remembered in Wales a century after his death"

reformer? The builder of monasteries or the constructor of military earthworks? European statesman or provincial bully-boy?

England in the eighth century comprised several independent kingdoms, each vying for power with its neighbours. In the seventh century the Northumbrians were particularly successful but in the eighth the Mercians were to dominate the political landscape. The first historian of the English, Bede, writing in 731, reported that in his day Æthelbald, king of the Mercians (the midland people of England), held power over all lands south of the Humber. Charters (documents recording land grants) in his name give him grandiose titles, one even calling him *rex Britanniae*: king of Britain.

Æthelbald had died at the hands of his own bodyguard in 756; his successor, Beornred, held the kingdom "for a little while and unhappily". When Offa acceded in 757, Æthelbald's expanded realm had shrunk to Mercia's traditional borders. The kingdom reached from the Trent/Mersey rivers in the north to the Thames in the south; its heartland lay in the Midlands and it extended east to the Fens.

By the 790s Offa had widened those bounds substantially. He absorbed the west midland kingdoms of the Hwicce (Worcestershire) and the Magonsætan (Herefordshire), and took control over Middlesex, Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Essex, East Anglia and Lindsey (Lincoln),

demoting the local independent royal rulers in each former kingdom to the status of ealdormen (noblemen). Offa had no direct power over either Wessex or Northumbria, though he made marriage alliances with their kings, Beorhtic and Æthelred. Documents that described Offa as king of the English (*rex Anglorum*) have been shown to be later forgeries, and Offa never called himself anything other than king of the Mercians, but he was the most powerful single ruler in England. His coinage reflects his sense of his own power effectively, especially the portrait-coins he issued in his own name and that of his wife, Cynethryth.

Offa on the European stage

Offa's power in England lent him aspirations on the European stage, where his dealings brought Anglo-continental relations into a new sphere. In 784 or 785 Pope Hadrian wrote to Charlemagne about an "incredible" rumour that Offa had plotted with Charles to depose the pope. Perhaps Offa objected to Hadrian's support for Jænberht in his refusal to anoint Offa's son. The pope's uneasiness about the English may explain his sending of legates in 786 to Northumbria and then to Offa's court. As a result of that mission, the Canterbury province was divided and Ecgrith anointed.

Tension also characterised Offa's relations with Charlemagne. When in c790 the latter suggested that one of Offa's daughters might marry his eldest son, Charles, Offa demanded in return that his own son, Ecgrith, be wed to Bertha, Charlemagne's daughter.

The Frankish king was "not a little angered", though it's unclear whether that was because he did not consider Offa as his equal or he was, as his biographer Einhard suggested, reluctant to let his daughters marry. Charlemagne ordered that "no one from the island of Britain or the people of the Angles was to set foot on the shores of Gaul for the purposes of trade." Merchants on both sides were forbidden to sail and it took the patient diplomacy of Gervold, abbot of Saint-Wandrille (collectors of taxes and tolls in the channel region), to resolve the dispute. Restored relations are reflected in a letter of 796, when Charlemagne sent Offa priceless gifts, which commented on pilgrims, merchants and aspects of cross-channel trade:

As for the black stones which your Reverence begged to be sent to you, let a messenger come and consider what kind you have in mind and we will willingly order them to be given, wherever they are to be found, and will help with their transport. But as you have intimated your wishes concerning the length of the stones, so our people make a demand about the size of the cloaks, that you may order them to be such as used to come to us in former times.



The black stones might have been Mayen lava quern stones from the Rhineland, but mention of their length and transportation problems suggests that Charlemagne could have been talking about black marble or porphyry for Offa's building projects. Interestingly, his grouse about the shortness of the English cloaks is one of our earliest references to the wool trade in England.

Charlemagne also mentioned English exiles sheltering at his court, some of royal birth, who had fled their homeland "to shun the danger of death". In one letter, Charlemagne asked the archbishop of Canterbury to intercede with Offa so that a particular group of exiles could "return to their native land and without unjust oppression of any kind, to serve anyone whatever".

That Frankia offered safe refuge to such men is a clear indication of the ambivalence of Charlemagne's attitude to Offa and provides another possible explanation for his reluctance to allow his daughter to go and live among the Mercians.

Offa's posthumous reputation was just as mixed. Writing to a Mercian nobleman after the death of Ecgrif, only months after he had taken over his father's realm, Alcuin (an English scholar at Charlemagne's court) said:

For truly, as I think, that most noble young man [ie Ecgrif] has not died for his own sins; but the vengeance for the blood shed by the father has reached the son. For you know very well how much blood his father shed to secure the kingdom on his son. This was not a strengthening of the kingdom, but its ruin.

Offa's use of fear and violence to achieve his ends was still remembered in Wales a century after his death. Asser, the Welsh monk from St David's who wrote a life of Alfred in c893, recalled:

There was in Mercia in fairly recent times a certain vigorous king called Offa, who terrified all the neighbouring kings and provinces around him, and who had a great dyke built between Wales and Mercia from sea to sea.

Yet in 13th-century St Albans, King Offa was commemorated as a great benefactor and as the founder of the monastery. The celebrated modern historian of the Anglo-Saxons, Sir Frank Stenton, may have been wrong to see Offa as a statesman whose supremacy throughout England was unchallenged. Historian Simon Keynes' more recent image of him as "a species of Mercian octopus, his tentacles reaching out over different people, smothering some and poised more or less threateningly over others" brings us closer to this complex man. **H**

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OFFA'S DYKE

WHAT YOU CAN SEE TODAY

This ambitious earthwork was built by a Mercian king in times of violence. More than 1,000 years later, its route can still be traced along the Welsh border

Where is Offa's Dyke?

In the 780s, Offa decided to build a dyke along the western border of his kingdom, separating it from the Welsh, with whom he had been in conflict since the Battle of Hereford in 760. The kingdom of Powys under King Eliseg was a particular threat. An inscription on a monument in the Vale of Llangollen erected in the mid-ninth century records that Eliseg "annexed the inheritance of Powys throughout nine years from the power of the English which he made into a sword-land by fire". The dyke does not in fact stretch, as Asser said it did, "from sea to sea" but runs for 64 miles from Rushock Hill in the Wye Valley north to Treuddyn, south of Mold. Other earthworks, such as Wat's Dyke, extend the border as far as the sea at each end.

Logistics and construction

Offa's Dyke is a major earthwork. The bank is still nearly 2 metres high in places, and the ditch was up to 1.8 metres deep; there was also probably a palisade along the crest. Building it required enormous manpower and strategic planning. Offa must have exploited the obligation to provide military service and manpower for building bridges and fortresses to which land grants refer, and may have drawn on a system of call-up similar to that we know King Alfred used in the 880s and 890s to build and defend the West Saxon forts. A rota of men drawn from each basic unit of land, the hide, would have been sent to work on a specified portion of the dyke.

The line chosen uses topography to ensure the best view to the west, to permit adequate drainage and to take account of local rivers. This earthwork was planned extremely carefully by people who must have known the landscape intimately.

Other earthworks

Offa was not the first to build a defended earthwork in England. Bede referred in his *Ecclesiastical History* to the earthwork built across England by Severus, saying that it was made "with sods cut from the earth" with "a ditch to its front and topped by a palisade of logs". There are also several smaller earthworks in the Herefordshire plain. To the north of Offa's Dyke is Wat's Dyke, believed to be almost 300 years older.

There are also continental parallels for

A military barrier

Traditionally, Offa's Dyke was thought to be a negotiated boundary, with gaps to permit trade passage between Mercia and Wales. But recent archaeological research indicates a fortified barrier with a military purpose. The ditch and bank always have their steep face on the Welsh side, showing that this is an offensive earthwork built to prevent the incursions of King Eliseg of Powys.

Gaps seen today can be shown to be later breaches; the original ditches still lie underneath these. There may have been some garrison points along the dyke, though no evidence has been found of any forts or towers. Regular patrols would have been sufficient if they could use the network of beacons across southern England to alert the wider population to any incursions.

Welsh responses

The Welsh monk Asser said that Offa built a dyke "from sea to sea". More accurate is the later medieval version of the Welsh annals for 787: "In the summer the Welsh devastated the territory of Offa, and then Offa caused a dyke to be made between him and Wales, to enable him more readily to withstand the attack. And that is called 'glawd Offa' from that day to this. And it extends from one sea to the other, from the south near Bristol to the north above Flint between the monastery of Basingwerk and Coleshill."

If we take this description to encompass the northern portion of Wat's Dyke then it offers an accurate account. It is natural that Welsh annalists would present this as Offa's attempt to defend himself against their military prowess. The standard Welsh technique at the time comprised swift raids into English territory to seize cattle, prisoners and valuables. Such an earthwork would certainly have made the raids a much more difficult proposition.

dyke-building. In 808 the Royal Frankish Annals reported that Godfrid, king of the Danes, "decided to fortify the border of his kingdom against Saxony with a rampart, so that a protective bulwark would stretch from the eastern sea-inlet to the west... and be broken by a single gate through which wagons and horsemen would be able to leave and enter. After dividing the work among the leaders of his troops he returned home." This we know as the Danevirke; it runs across the neck of Jutland near Slesvig.

6 Clwydian Hills

Denbighshire/Flintshire

A section of the Offa's Dyke Path runs through an AONB here, with great views from heather-clad hilltops crowned with Iron Age hillforts including Moel Fenlli and Moel Arthur.

● www.cpat.org.uk/educate/guides/clwydhil/clwydhil.htm



Offa's Dyke Path runs along the western ramparts of Penycloddiau hillfort, Clwyd

3 Offa's Dyke Centre

Knighton, Powys

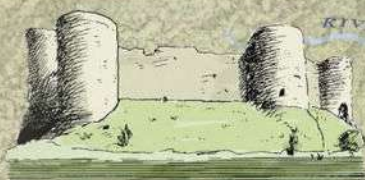
The Offa's Dyke visitor centre has facilities for walkers and an exhibition centre with interactive displays exploring the National Trail, the Welsh border area and the construction of the dyke.

● 01547 528753, www.offasdyke.demon.co.uk/odc.htm
● Knighton Tourist Information: 01547 529424

2 White Castle Monmouthshire

White Castle lies on Offa's Dyke Path, about 10 miles from Monmouth near the village of Llantilio Crossenny. It was built in the 12th century by the Normans as part of a chain of castles to secure the Welsh border, and is first mentioned in the reign of Henry II. It gets its name from the plaster that once coated the walls.

● cadw.gov.wales/daysout/whitecastle

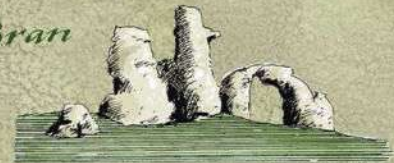


White Castle

Walking Offa's Dyke

The Offa's Dyke Path is a National Trail that runs for 177 miles from Sedbury Cliffs, on the Severn Estuary near Chepstow, to the north Wales resort of Prestatyn on Liverpool Bay. For about 60 miles it follows the course of the earthwork.

● www.offasdyke.demon.co.uk
● www.nationaltrail.co.uk/OffasDyke



5 Castell Dinas Bran

Denbighshire

This ruined 13th-century castle stands on an Iron Age hillfort and overlooks Llangollen. It is a spectacular spot, and a steep climb affords stupendous views.

● www.cpat.org.uk/educate/guides/dinasb/dinasb.htm



Walkers atop the bank of Offa's Dyke at Llanfair Hill in Shropshire

4 Llanfair Hill Shropshire

Adjacent to Offa's Dyke Path, this is one of the best places to see a well-preserved section of the bank of the dyke and the ditch beside it on the west side. For this and other sections to visit, see the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust.

● www.cpat.org.uk/offa/visit.htm



1 Tintern Abbey Monmouthshire

A well-preserved section of Offa's Dyke can be seen as a well-defined bank next to Devil's Pulpit, a small rocky outcrop in a break in woodland that gives good views down to Tintern Abbey.

● cadw.gov.wales/daysout/tinternabbey

SWANSEA

CARDIFF

BRISTOL



ANGLO- VS VIKI

SAXONS AND ANGLES

Discover how the English responded to raids from across the North Sea, and meet the key rulers who confronted the Norse threat

Why did the violent raids



Vikings' begin?

Robert Ferguson argues that the chief motivation behind the Vikings' brutal raids on the British Isles was the need to defend their culture in the face of a Christian onslaught

The 'holy island' of Lindisfarne, just off the coast of Northumberland. A savage raid on the island's monastery in 793 heralded the start of England's Viking era

Anglo-Saxons vs Vikings / Cause of the raids

On a clear day, a Viking longship at sea could be seen some 18 nautical miles away. With a favourable wind, that distance could be covered in about an hour – which

was perhaps all the time that the monks at Lindisfarne had to prepare themselves against attack on one fateful day in 793. This was the raid that signalled the start of the violence associated with the onset of the Viking age.

“We and our fathers have now lived in this fair land for nearly 350 years, and never before has such an atrocity been seen in Britain as we have now suffered at the hands of a pagan people. Such a voyage was not thought possible. The church of Saint Cuthbert is spattered with the blood of the priests of God, stripped of all its furnishings, exposed to the plundering of pagans – a place more sacred than any in Britain.”

The extract is from a letter, written in the wake of the attack, to King Æthelred of Northumbria by Alcuin. Alcuin had been a monk in York before accepting an invitation in 781 to join Charlemagne at his court in Aachen, where he became the Frankish king’s leading spiritual advisor.

Historians have been inclined to take Alcuin’s astonishment at the raid at face value, and supposed the Vikings to be a wholly unknown quantity. Yet in the same letter Alcuin rebuked Æthelred and his courtiers for aping the fashions of the heathens: “Consider the luxurious dress, hair and behaviour of leaders and people,” he urged the king. “See how you have wanted to copy the pagan way of cutting hair and beards. Are not these the people whose terror threatens us, yet you want to copy their hair?”



A 14th-century manuscript showing Abd ar-Rahman I, who helped make Islam a force to be reckoned with in Europe in the eighth century

The obvious conclusion is that, at the time of the raid, the Northumbrians were already familiar with their Norwegian visitors. What was new was the violence.

Lindisfarne turned out to be the start of a wave of similar attacks on monasteries in northern Britain. Alcuin, with his local knowledge, warned the religious communities at nearby Wearmouth and Jarrow to be on their guard: “You live by the sea from whence this plague first came.”

In 794, Vikings “ravaged in Northumbria, and plundered Ecgfrith’s monastery at Donemuthan”. The 12th-century historian Symeon of Durham identified this as the monastery at Jarrow, and reported that its protector, Saint Cuthbert, had not let the heathens go unpunished, “for their chief was killed by the English... And these things befell them rightly, for they had gravely injured those who had not injured them.”

Shetland and Orkney were probably



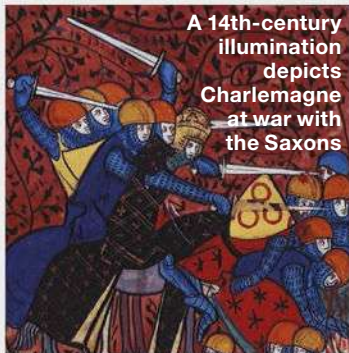
A bronze of Charlemagne dating from the ninth or tenth century

“In 782, Charlemagne’s army forcibly baptised and then executed 4,500 Saxons”

TIMELINE ENGLAND AND THE VIKING EMPIRE

782

Charlemagne’s Christian armies forcibly **baptise and then behead** 4,500 heathen Saxon prisoners at Verden on the banks of the river Aller.



A 14th-century illumination depicts Charlemagne at war with the Saxons

793

The raid on Lindisfarne is the first in a series of terrorist attacks on ‘soft’ Christian targets in the north of Britain.



The Vikings attack Lindisfarne on a picture stone (c800)

851

For the first time since raiding began on mainland England, a Viking army doesn’t return home after the summer but spends the winter camped at Thanet.

Three other explanations for Viking violence

Faster ships, internal strife and new trade links may also have helped trigger the raids

1 Technological advances that encouraged piracy

The onset of the Viking age coincided with the appearance of the technologically advanced, sail-powered longship – the stealth bomber of its time. Longships such as the Oseberg ship (built 820) replaced giant man-powered vessels like the Storhaug ship, found on Karmøy (buried 779), opening up the seas to young Scandinavian pirates as never before.

Replicas of the Oseberg (left) and Gokstad ships, examples of a type that enabled ninth-century Viking raiders to go farther faster



A detail from the Oseberg burial mound showing Vikings fighting

2 Poverty and overpopulation

In his history *On the Customs and Deeds of the First Norman Dukes* (995–1015), Dudo of Saint-Quentin wrote that, in former times in the Scandinavian homelands, quarrels over land and property were resolved by “the drawing of lots”. Losers were condemned to a life abroad where “by fighting they can gain themselves countries”.

Viking hoards include Byzantine and Islamic coins



3 A flood of riches into Scandinavia

Trading led to an influx of silver bullion into Scandinavia from the Islamic world, creating elites around which ambitious young men gathered. Leaders had to reward these men for their military support and loyalty, and did so by plundering abroad on the grand scale.

865

The ‘Great Heathen Army’ lands in England. Within 15 years, much of eastern England is under the rule of its leaders. Scandinavian political organisation and law-codes are introduced.



A wooden post featuring a ninth-century carved animal head, made in Norway

878

The Wessex king Alfred formally recognises the Viking chieftain Guthrum as king of East Anglia. Guthrum agrees to baptism, taking and using the Christian and Anglo-Saxon name Æthelstan.



A c1390 vellum shows Harald I Fairhair greeting Guthrum, Viking king of East Anglia

Anglo-Saxons vs Vikings / Cause of the raids



Charlemagne is crowned by Pope Leo III in a 14th-century French manuscript. The emperor's violent subjugation of heathens may have provoked the Viking raids

overrun during this first wave of violence, and the indigenous population of Picts wiped out so swiftly that local place names and the names of natural phenomena such as rivers and mountains vanished, to be replaced by Scandinavian names.

Ireland and the Western Isles of Scotland suffered, too. *The Annals of Ulster* report the burning in 795 of the monastery at Rechru, and the Isle of Skye "overwhelmed and laid waste". Iona was attacked for a first time in 795 and again in 802. In a third raid in 806 the monastery was torched and the community of 68 wiped out. Work started the following year on a safe refuge for the revived community at Kells in Ireland.

In 799 the island monastery of Noirmoutier off the north-west coast of France was attacked for the first time. By 836 it had been raided so often that its monks also abandoned the site and sought refuge in a safer location. It soon became clear, however, that there was no such thing as a safe refuge.

Best form of defence

Why was there such hatred in the attacks, and why did they start in 793, rather than 743, or 843? To look for a triggering event we need to examine the political situation in northern Europe at the time.

At the commencement of the Viking age, the major political powers in the world were Byzantium in the east; the Muslims, whose expansion had taken them as far as Turkistan and Asia Minor to create an Islamic barrier between the northern and southern hemispheres; and the Franks, who had become the dominant tribe among the successor states after the fall of the Roman empire in the west.

Charlemagne became sole ruler of the Franks in 771. He took seriously the missionary obligations imposed on him by his position as the most powerful ruler in western Christendom, and expended a huge amount of energy on the subjugation of the heathen Saxons on his north-east border. In 772, his

GETTY / AKG IMAGES / BRIDGEMAN



965

King Harald Bluetooth orders the carving of the Jelling Stone to record the conversion of the Danes to Christianity. The stone is the first significant representation of Christ in Scandinavia.

The Jelling Stone, which marks the conversion of the Danes

1012

The sack of Canterbury and murder of the archbishop of Canterbury presages the fall of Anglo-Saxon England. Within four years Harald's grandson, Cnut, is king of England.

King Cnut donates a cross to Newminster in this 1031 illustration



1028

Cnut's North Sea empire reaches its greatest extent with the acquisition of Norway. It also includes England, Denmark and much of southern Sweden.



forces crossed into Saxon territory and destroyed Irminsul, the sacred tree that was their most holy totem. In 779, Widukind, the Saxon leader, was defeated in battle at Bocholt and Saxony taken over and divided into missionary districts. Charlemagne himself presided over a number of mass baptisms.

In 782, his armies forcibly baptised and then executed 4,500 Saxon captives at Verden, on the banks of the river Aller. Campaigns of enforced resettlement followed, but resistance continued until a final insurrection was put down in 804. By this time Charlemagne had already been rewarded for his missionary activities by Pope Leo III who in Rome in AD 800 crowned him emperor – emperor not of a geographical area nor even of a collection of

peoples but of the abstract conception of Christendom as a single community.

With their physical subjugation complete, the cultural subjugation of the Saxons followed. Death was the penalty for eating meat during Lent; death for cremating the dead in accordance with heathen rites; death for rejecting baptism.

Several times, in the course of the campaign of resistance, Widukind sought refuge across the border with his brother-in-law Sigfrid, a Danish king. News of Charlemagne's depredations, and in particular the Verden massacre, must have travelled like a shock wave through Danish territory and beyond.

How should the heathen Scandinavians react to the threat? For, whether they knew it



Were Vikings such as this helmeted warrior simply men from Vik?

The etymology of the word 'Viking'

It is not even certain that 'Viking' is Scandinavian in origin. It occurs several times in the Old English poems *Widsith*, usually dated to the end of the seventh century, and in the eighth-century *Exodus*, in which the tribe of Reuben are described as "**sæwicingas**", meaning 'sea-warriors', as they cross the Red Sea on their way out of Egypt.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle uses the term only four times before 1066, in the native English forms **wicenga** or **wicinga**, in 879, 885, 921 and 982. Some linguists believe it derives from the Latin **vīcus**, meaning 'camp' or 'dwelling-place'. Others suggest it comes from an Old Norse verb **vīkja**, meaning 'to travel from place to place'.

A simple and persuasive theory is that it originally denoted people from the **Vik**, the name for the bay area of south-east Norway around the Oslo fjord that also denoted the inland coastal region, and included the coast of Bohuslän in present-day Sweden. There is support for the suggestion in the frequency with which the waters of the Vik appear in saga literature, suggesting it was the most heavily trafficked maritime area in the region at the time.

1031

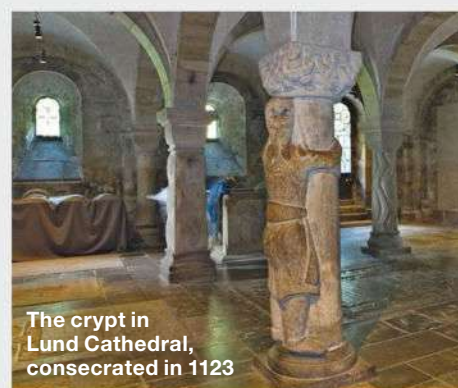
Olav Haraldsson, a former Viking who was baptised and became king of Norway, is canonised. During his reign, Christian culture was firmly institutionalised in Norway.

The death of Olav Haraldsson in the battle of Stiklestad, 29 July 1030



1104

The archbishopric of Lund in southern Sweden is created, the first in Scandinavia. This marks the end of heathendom as the prevailing religious and political culture in the region.



The crypt in Lund Cathedral, consecrated in 1123



A 10th-century vellum shows Viking warriors disembarking in England during the second wave of migration

“The archbishop of Canterbury was murdered for the sport of a drunken group of men under a Viking earl”

or not, they were on Alcuin’s list of peoples to be converted. In 789 he wrote to a friend working among the Saxons: “Tell me, is there any hope of our converting the Danes?”

The question for the Vikings was: should they simply wait for Charlemagne’s armies to arrive and set about the task? Or should they fight to defend their culture?

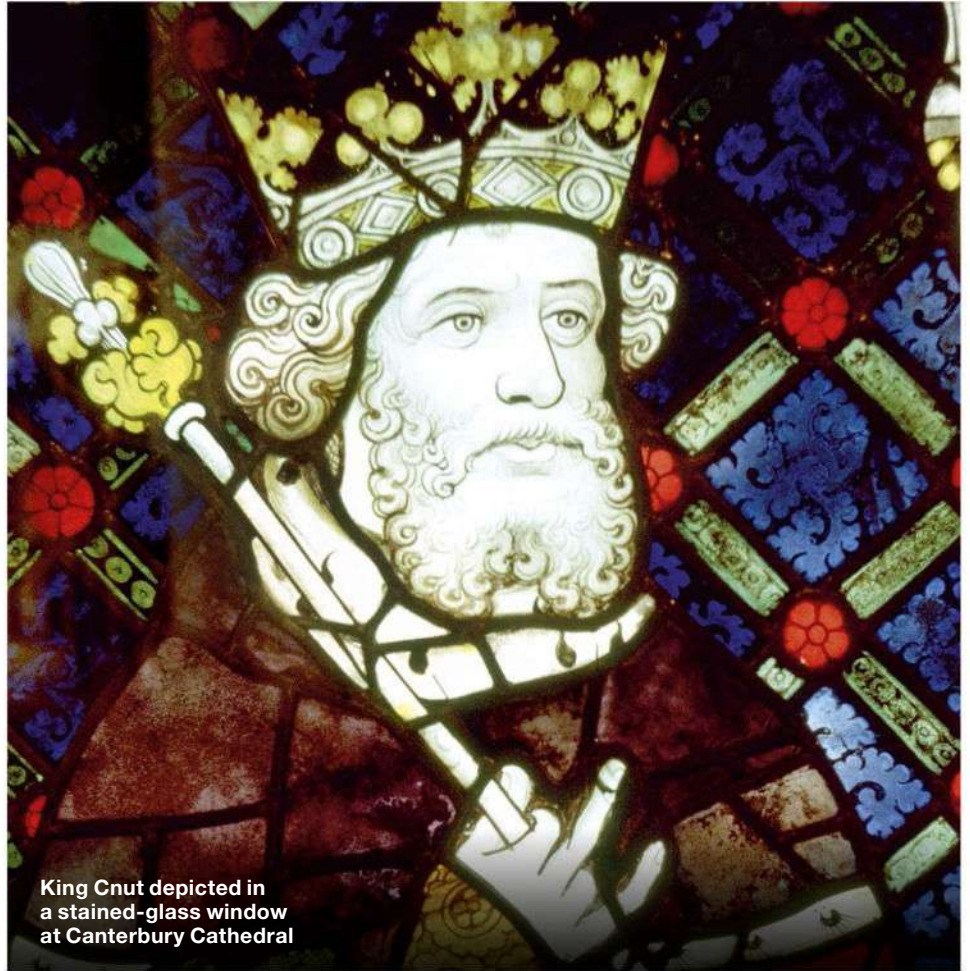
A military campaign against the might of Frankish Christendom was out of the question. However, the Christian monasteries – such as Lindisfarne – dotted around the rim of northern Europe were symbolically important and, in the parlance of modern terrorist warfare, ‘soft targets’. So, with an indifference to the humanity of their victims as complete as that of Charlemagne’s towards the Saxons, these first Viking raiders were able to set off on a punishing series of attacks in the grip of a no-holds-barred rage directed at Christian ‘others’.

The Christian annalists who documented Viking violence insistently saw the conflict as a battle between religious cultures. A century after the first attack on Lindisfarne, Asser, in his biography of Alfred the Great, continued to refer to the much larger bands of Vikings who had by now established themselves along the eastern seaboard of England as “the pagans” (*pagani*), and to their victims as “Christians” (*christiani*).

Clash of faiths

Attacks such as those mounted by Vikings were almost impossible to defend against, and long before Asser’s time the raiders had discovered how easy it was to plunder what was probably the richest country in western Europe. In 851 a fleet of 350 ships sailed up the Thames to attack London and Canterbury then, instead of sailing home, spent the winter encamped at Thanet. It was a prelude to the arrival in 865 of what the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle called the “Great Heathen Army” – a force that, after 15 years of warring against the demoralised kingdoms of Northumbria, Wessex, Mercia and East Anglia, had gained control of England from York down to East Anglia.

By 927 much of the lost territory had been regained by the Wessex king Alfred the Great,



King Cnut depicted in a stained-glass window at Canterbury Cathedral

his son Edward and grandson Æthelstan, but by that time the achievements of the Great Heathen Army had become part of the cultural history of young Viking males.

Large-scale Viking violence returned to England during the reign of King Æthelred in the 990s, under the Dane, Swein Forkbeard, and the Norwegian, Olaf Tryggvason. The policy of the ‘danegeld’ – protection money paid in return for being left alone – was practised with a punishing regularity. It was with wealth gained in this fashion that the Viking Olaf Tryggvason financed his successful bid for the crown of Norway in 995.

In 1012 the archbishop of Canterbury was captured and, when the ransom demanded for him was not forthcoming, was murdered for the sport of a drunken group of men under the Viking earl Thorkell the Tall. They pelted him with bones, stones, blocks of wood and the skulls of cattle before finishing him off with the flat of an axe.

The loss of its spiritual head brought the faltering Anglo-Saxon monarchy to its knees, and within two years a Danish king, Swein Forkbeard, was on the throne of England. By 1028 Swein’s son Cnut was ruler of a North Sea empire that included Denmark (with Skåne in Sweden), Norway, and all England.

In name, at least, the heathens were now Christians but their pride in themselves as conquering warriors remained strong. A poem in praise of Cnut – composed by his Icelandic court poet, Sigvat – invoked the


memory of the Northumbrian king Ælla of York, defeated in battle by Ivar the Boneless during the first surge of the Great Heathen Army: “And Ivar, who dwelt in York, carved the eagle on Ælla’s back.”

Remarkably, Cnut’s triumphs figured in Sigvat’s literary imagination as the successful resolution of a conflict that had been going on for over 150 years, beginning as a series of gestures of cultural self-defence and soon after developing into dreams of conquest.

Alcuin had foreseen the ultimate consequences of the first Viking raid of 793 with visionary precision. “Who does not fear this?” he asked King Æthelred of Northumbria. “Who does not lament this as if his country were captured?” In his distress, he was overlooking the fact that the Vikings were only doing what his own Saxon forefathers had done to the Britons and Celts of the kingdoms of England some three and a half centuries earlier, conquering “this fair land” by the same means – violence – as the Vikings.

Cnut was unlucky with his sons, and Danish rule in England lasted less than 30 years. Fifteen years on and the memories of King Cnut and his North Sea empire were all but wiped out by the greater drama of Duke William of Normandy’s conquest of 1066. **H**

Robert Ferguson has been a leading scholar and exponent of Scandinavian culture and history for over 30 years. He lives in Oslo and on the Isle of Cumbrae



A modern illustration depicts a martial-looking Viking longship – but, after early raids, Vikings and Anglo-Saxons developed a more nuanced relationship



HOW ENGLAND RODE THE VIKING STORM

From the late eighth century, waves of Viking raids brought terror to Britain's shores – yet within decades the dynamic had changed. **Ryan Lavelle** argues that Alfred the Great's relationship with the Danes was defined as much by compromise as by the power of the sword

An early scene in the recent BBC Two series *The Last Kingdom* sees the hero (or anti-hero) Uhtred, dispossessed claimant to the Northumbrian fortress of Bamburgh, entering the city of Winchester for the first time. Uhtred and his companion, both raised in a Danish household and in many ways more habituated to Danish customs than Anglo-Saxon ones, gain rapid access to the royal court of Alfred of Wessex. At the heart of the court, the pagan Uhtred is granted an audience with the Christian prince – and their discussions range from knowledge of the world to military strategies. From this, we get an insight into Alfred's relationship with Uhtred, how each sees the other – and, crucially, how each intends to use the other.

Could such a scene really have played out in ninth-century Winchester? Why was a prince of the West Saxons extending the hand of friendship to a pagan – effectively a Dane, no less – at some point in the early 870s? The stereotypes dictate that a Danish Viking was too intent on pillaging to engage in any communication but violence. Received opinion also has it that the West Saxons were far too pious to accept Scandinavians as anything but the scourge of God, to be resisted by warriors and suffered by holy men.

Viking onslaught

In many ways, the West Saxons' attempts to defend their realm in the face of the Viking onslaught – particularly under Alfred 'the Great' in the final decades of the ninth century – is a story of conflict, of battles and stratagems, peace treaties made and broken, and of military leaders straining for victory in the direst of circumstances.

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and *Life of King Alfred* – the West Saxons' main courtly products telling the story of these years – that military leadership was provided by Alfred himself. But no matter whether Alfred can really be personally credited with the successes of the West Saxon kingdom in repelling the Viking threat, there is more to the story than conflict and the imposition of a West Saxon peace. Compromise, trust and understanding between the two peoples – as portrayed by the fictional Uhtred and Alfred in *The Last Kingdom* – was also at the heart of what it meant to be English in the 9th and early 10th centuries.

Where early medieval 'Englishness' was once regarded as binary – either you were English or you weren't – and the West Saxons' defence against the Vikings was seen as a part of the making of that Englishness,



Alexander Dreyfuss plays Uhtred Ragnarson, Saxon-born but raised by Vikings, in the BBC Two series *The Last Kingdom*

there is now room for a more nuanced story. The Vikings who came to England in the ninth century were woven into this story in a way that made them so much more than the pagan 'other'.

That is not to say that Danes did not represent an existential threat to Anglo-Saxon rulers and their kingdoms, particularly Wessex. During the later part of the ninth century, the West Saxon kingdom was defined by its difference from the Danish-held territories – and the need to defend themselves against the Danish threat drove much of the West Saxons' policy forward. The Danes launched numerous attacks on Wessex, and the kingdom itself was almost lost to at least one well-organised incursion.

From the introduction of military service to the building of 'burhs' (fortifications), the character of the West Saxon kingdom was determined by a Scandinavian threat outside it.

One of the terms that Christian writers most often employed to describe the pirates who exploded upon the western European scene in the late eighth and early ninth centuries was 'Northmen', a word that, while (mostly) being geographically accurate, recalled the apocalyptic idea, trumpeted in the Book of Jeremiah, that evil would come from the north. To many religious writers, it must have seemed that these 'Northmen' indeed *did* herald the end-time. But by the late ninth century, we see fewer 'Northmen' in

Anglo-Saxon sources, as the term gave way to 'Dane'. And the reason for this may lie in the increasing representation of Vikings as people who you could do business with.

It seems that this was a meaningful distinction – and one that may have been reflected in the pages of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. While an early English text had labelled the instigators of an attack on Dorset in c789 as 'Northmen', a later account of the very same incident in the *Chronicle* refers to the aggressors as 'Danes'. It was perhaps a telling editorial modification.

Unifying identities

This important, if tentative, change in attitude was reflected in the growing number of peace agreements that the two sides signed in the late ninth century. The most important of these was the 'Alfred-Guthrum' treaty, sealed following Alfred's 878 victory at the battle of Ethandun (Edington, Wiltshire), which shattered the Vikings' ambition of conquering Wessex. The surviving document that records Alfred's triumph probably represents a renegotiation of the territory between the two leaders.

In many ways, this treaty recognised how 'Danes' and 'Englishmen' were separated and subjected to different legal systems. However, the fact that both groups were subject to the same law – which was agreed by two sets of leaders, "confirmed with oaths, for themselves and for their subjects, both for the living and for the unborn" – created a sort of unified identity that had not before existed in the area that is now referred to as England.

That sense of peace was important. The Venerable Bede, the eighth-century Northumbrian author of a work long recognised as providing Alfred's 'blueprint' for the idea of an *Angelcynn* (English realm), had reported that an early Anglo-Saxon king, Edwin, had provided the conditions in which a woman could travel with a newborn child from sea to sea without fear. Whether the conditions in late ninth-century England really allowed for such journeys is immaterial. Alfred's allusion to those "unborn" might have been intended with Bede's sense of peace in mind; a king who provided peace for an *Angelcynn* was one who recognised 'Danes' as potential subjects. There was precedent to be followed here, but it was not an English

"To many religious writers, it must have seemed that 'Northmen' did indeed herald the apocalypse, but by the late ninth century these attitudes were beginning to change"



Saint Edmund is captured by Danes in a c1130 illumination. His death in 869 would go down in infamy yet, despite this, Vikings and Anglo-Saxons would learn to co-operate

“Though the Viking threat had not disappeared, these ‘North-men’ were different from those who had perpetrated apocalyptic attacks”

precedent. Instead it came from across the Channel, in the land of the Franks (roughly equivalent to modern-day France).

Historians have largely debunked the old myth of there being a great chasm between the dealings of the Western Franks and Alfred with the Vikings – the former traditionally damned as a failure, the latter hailed as a spectacular success. In fact, Frankish treaties with Vikings not only worked but also enhanced the standing of a number of rulers – these were not embarrassing episodes of compromise but moments to be celebrated. And they may have influenced Alfred – who had visited the court of Charles the Bald in West Frankia as a young boy in the 850s – for he, too, was aware of the value of bringing Vikings into the Christian fold.

Though not particularly successful in the long term, the baptism by Charles the Bald’s father, Emperor Louis the Pious, of the Danish ruler Harald Klak in 826 had been a seminal event in the Carolingian court. Here we might trace the transformation from ‘Northmen’ to ‘Danes’, as Frankish authors took the event to their hearts as a means of depicting the imperial idea of Frankish kingship.

Around this time, Frankish writers started to take a serious interest in who ‘Danes’ were, and, given the Anglo-Saxons’ preoccupation with Frankish affairs, it is perhaps not surprising that this was echoed in England a generation or two later. Charles the Bald had been a young boy at the ceremony and it evidently had a major effect on him, just as Alfred’s visit to the Frankish court had an impact on the Anglo-Saxon ruler’s life.

Moment of triumph

An example of how a spirit of compromise had permeated Alfred’s Wessex is provided by the fact that Vikings were serving in the community of the Somerset monastery of Athelney, a site founded to celebrate Alfred’s great moment of triumph in 878. The famous biographer of Alfred’s life, Asser of St David’s, described them as “pagans” (*pagani*). Yet

clearly they were not really pagans in the religious sense – they were, after all, part of a Christian community.

Around the same time, Alfred received the Scandinavian sea captain, Ottarr (Anglicised as Ohthere), at court. Ottarr is described in an Old English text as “most northern of the North-men”. Just as the fictional Uhtred comes to the West Saxon court in *The Last Kingdom*, this ninth-century view of Alfred has the king using Ottarr to discover more about the lands and peoples of Scandinavia. This provides further evidence that, though the Viking threat had by no means disappeared, these ‘North-men’ were very different from those who had perpetrated the apocalyptic attacks of a few decades earlier.

The lands they lived in were no longer mysterious. The understanding of them was more subtle, more complex, and far more human. Indeed, an object similar to the so-called ‘Alfred Jewel’, an artefact described by an Old English text as an *æstel*, has been found during excavations of a chieftain’s complex at Borg on the Lofoten Islands in northern Norway. Did Ottarr carry the ‘Borg Æstel’ back home after his stay at the West Saxon court? If so, it showed that a symbol of Alfred’s lordship – these objects were, after all, closely linked with Alfred’s court – had huge resonance in Scandinavia.

Ottarr was not an ‘Englishman’ but in some respects his relationship with “his lord Alfred” demonstrates that relationships between peoples were about more than just ties of blood and clearly defined nationhood.

This remained the case well into the 10th century. For though the West Saxons’ expansion in the early 900s saw English Christians forcing Danes and other Vikings into submission through strongarm tactics, ‘Danes’ and ‘English’ continued to make agreements and negotiate over territory in a way that mirrored the diplomacy of their predecessors.

In fact, the descendants of ninth-century Scandinavian lords became the ‘men’ of English rulers – particularly Edward the Elder (899–924) and Æthelstan (924–39) – who allowed their new subjects to keep their lands in return for a submission to lordship.

So this was not purely a story of nationhood or of the triumph of one group over another. Instead, the Vikings’ role in the making of ‘England’ demonstrated that different peoples’ dealings with one another needed to be defined by flexibility as much as by factionalism and conflict. **II**

Ryan Lavelle is reader in medieval history at the University of Winchester. He is co-editor of *Danes in Wessex: The Scandinavian Impact on Southern England, c800–c1100* (Oxbow, 2016)

Living in the shadow of the Vikings

From Cornish rebellions to puppet kings, our map shows how the Norsemen’s raids impacted on the kingdoms of Britain in the ninth century

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM JAY

Strathclyde

A Welsh (‘British’) kingdom whose territory ranged across modern-day Scotland and Cumbria in north-western England, it was dealt a blow when Dumbarton Rock was besieged by Dublin Vikings in 870. With Govan (now in Glasgow) as its likely religious centre, Strathclyde continued as a political force well into the 10th century.

Welsh kingdoms

A range of kings with a variety of extents of power and layers of lordship appears to have been the order in early Wales, with Gwynedd in the north-west coming to the fore. Though Rhodri Mawr (‘the Great’) suffered at Viking and English hands, and was probably killed by Mercians in 878, his successors asserted dominance over many of the neighbouring kingdoms, making alliances with Vikings and Anglo-Saxons according to circumstances.

Cornwall

Cornwall was coming under the direct control of the West Saxons in the ninth century. At least some Cornishmen resisted, allying with Vikings in 838. The death of the last known Cornish king is recorded in a Welsh annal in 875 but the survival of Celtic place names in Cornwall shows how the old kingdom never became a full part of the Anglo-Saxon world.



Alba

By the late ninth century, the areas controlled by kings of the Picts and Scots were beginning to be referred to as Alba, the Gaelic word for 'Britain', suggesting change was in the air. The kingdom of Alba was controlled by a line of rulers of the house of Alpin who emerged during the ninth-century upheaval of Viking attacks to assert domination over large swathes of territory that would form the core of a later Scottish kingdom.

Northumbria and the Kingdom of York

The kingdom of the Northumbrians had been created by the merging of the southern kingdom of Deira, focused on York, and the northern kingdom of Bernicia. Vikings controlled York from the 860s and settled soon after, while Bamburgh remained a seat of continuing Anglo-Saxon power in the north.

Mercia

Kings of Mercia had held overlordship over other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the eighth century, but remained a force to be reckoned with in the ninth. Years of hard campaigning led to the replacement of the Mercians' king in 874 by a ruler who may have been a Viking 'puppet', then by Æthelred, an ealdorman (governor) likely to have been subordinate to King Alfred.

East Anglia

The last independent Anglo-Saxon king of the East Angles was killed by Vikings in 869 and is remembered as Saint Edmund. East Anglia became a Viking kingdom under the control of Guthrum, christened Æthelstan in 878. A decade of peace led to control by other Vikings after Guthrum's death, but their coins bearing the name of Saint Edmund reveal how they 'bought into' Anglo-Saxon politics.

Wessex

Ruled by the descendants of Egbert, who had seized power at the start of the ninth century, the West Saxon kingdom controlled much of the south of England by the time of Alfred the Great (reigned 871–99), who managed to hold onto his throne in the face of Viking attacks.



Hamo Thornycroft's 1901 statue of King Alfred the Great in Winchester. Acknowledging that good fortune played a role in Alfred's reign is important, says Alex Burghart, "as it reveals just how fragile the conditions were that surrounded the birth of England"

ALFRED THE GREAT A LUCKY KING?

With good fortune playing a part in his succession and subsequent military victories, did the Anglo-Saxon icon really owe his success to serendipity?

Alex Burghart asks if we're guilty of overplaying Alfred's greatness



A silver penny of Alfred the Great, whose remarkable fightback against England's Viking invaders has made him the king that historians love to love

For Anglo-Saxon England, AD 878 marked the nadir of the Viking wars. Had events played out only slightly differently the whole history of England might have been fundamentally altered. In that year the great Viking army that had been plundering and conquering Anglo-Saxon kingdoms since 865 marched on King Alfred's Wessex.

During the previous 12 years almost all of the great kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England had fallen to the Danish Vikings. In 866 they stormed York and killed the two kings of Northumbria. In 869 they martyred King Edmund of East Anglia by tying him to a tree and filling him full of arrows. And then, in 877, they divided the ancient kingdom of Mercia in two.

By 878, very roughly, England north of the A5 (or Watling Street, as the Anglo-Saxons called it) lay in Danish hands. Alfred's Wessex effectively stood alone. Now the Viking army fell upon Wessex with a vengeance. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle would remember that "In this year [878] in midwinter after 12th night the enemy army came stealthily to Chippenham, and occupied the land of the West Saxons and settled there, and drove a great part of the people across the sea, and conquered most of the others; and the people submitted to them, except King Alfred. He journeyed in difficulties through the woods and fen-fastnesses with a small force."

This ambush – a lightning strike launched from Gloucester (a mere 30 miles away) – was designed to capture the king while he was celebrating Christmas at the royal manor of Chippenham. Confronted with such a swift, targeted invasion, Alfred was lucky to escape. He did so with the support of a small band of men, fleeing to the seclusion of the nearby Somerset marshes.

Having regrouped, Alfred managed covertly to muster forces across the kingdom and, within the year, defeated the Viking army at Edington in Wiltshire, converted the Danish king, Guthrum, to Christianity and had him leave Wessex. Without this reversal, there would probably have been no England and no English language. Alfred would have been a mere footnote in the history of 'Daneland' – which would have been written in Anglo-Danish.

This was not the only time in Alfred's life that luck played a critical role – something that's not always been borne out by histories of the king. Though it was only in the 16th century that writers tagged him with his 'Great' epithet, Alfred swiftly came to be treated as the saviour – and even father – of England (even though England was not

The battle for England in Alfred's reign



unified until the reign of his grandson, Æthelstan). At times the reviews have been a touch too rave. The eminently bearded Victorian historian, Edward Augustus Freeman, called Alfred "the most perfect character in history". Indeed, his reputation as a 'great' king has often obscured those moments in his reign where chance played more of a part than wisdom. On a number of occasions, his fate – and that of the kingdom – hung by a fortuitous thread.

A famous victory

Alfred may have succeeded in pushing the Vikings out of Wessex in 878, but the army that he faced was actually only one part of a much larger Danish force. This was not the first time that had happened. His first run-in with the Danes took place in 871 while his brother, Æthelred I, was still on the throne. In that year he fought nine battles against the Danes and won a famous victory at Ashdown. Yet he faced only half the army that had invaded Britain in 865. In 869, two years

before the battle of Ashdown, the Danish host had divided into two after it had conquered the kingdoms of Northumbria and East Anglia, sending one group north and the other south. Alfred had to fight only one division of the great army that had conquered two of his neighbours – and his victory was, by all accounts, extremely close.

Similarly, in 878, when Alfred managed to overcome the Danes after they had captured Chippenham, he had to fight only one part of the full Danish force. Though a new war band led by Guthrum joined the southern army after the battle of Ashdown in 871, causing Alfred to "make peace" (for which read 'pay off'), it too was to split. Leaving Wessex following the clash at Ashdown, it went to London and then to Northumbria and Lincolnshire before conquering Mercia in 874. Having driven the Mercian king Burgred into exile, it divided and sent one contingent to Northumbria while the other went to Cambridge, from where it would attack Wessex (in 876) – marching first to Wareham,



Alfred sits in the initial 'E' in a 14th-century manuscript. He's been hailed as the saviour of England but the fate of his kingdom hung by a thread on more than one occasion

“Had the full Danish army marched directly on Wessex, it’s likely that – for all the tales of Alfred’s military prowess – his kingdom would have been soundly defeated”

then to Exeter and finally to Chippenham via Gloucester. As was to be the case in 878, Alfred found himself fighting a smaller army than the one that had vanquished his neighbours – and even then, he was nearly defeated.

Had the full Danish army marched directly on Wessex in 866, or had they not divided in 874, it’s likely that – for all the tales of Alfred’s military prowess – his kingdom would have been conquered.

If anything symbolises the turnaround in Alfred’s fortunes, it’s the decision of Æthelred, the ruler of western Mercia – the part that the Danes had not conquered – to subject himself to the Wessex king’s lordship in 879.

For centuries the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex had been arch-enemies, waging wars against each other and, on more than one occasion, nearly wiping each other out. The union of the two kingdoms was a remarkable

moment, one that would seem to underscore the dynamism of Alfred’s rule. Yet closer inspection of the sources shows that the Mercian ruler’s decision to submit to Alfred had more to do with developments on the Welsh border.

The Mercians and the Welsh kingdoms had long been at odds. A few years before, the Mercians had defeated and killed the great Rhodri Mawr of Gwynedd. But then, around

Alfred and the war with the Vikings



Alfred's brother King Æthelberht (pictured) dies and is succeeded by another brother, Æthelred. The Great Danish Army (sometimes called the Great Heathen Army) lands in East Anglia

865

866

The Great Danish Army captures York, kills the two Northumbrian kings and conquers the kingdom



This ninth-century Viking picture stone depicts warriors duelling

869

King Edmund of East Anglia (later Saint Edmund of Bury St Edmunds) is killed by the Great Danish Army and his kingdom conquered. The army divides, with one part marching north and the other south

871

Nine battles are fought in Wessex. The West Saxons defeat the Danes at Ashdown. The Danes are joined by Viking king Guthrum's army. King Æthelred dies and Alfred becomes king of Wessex. The West Saxons make peace with the Danes, who agree to leave Wessex

874

The Danes conquer the kingdom of Mercia and send King Burgred into exile

A 20th-century tapestry shows Danes filling King Edmund of East Anglia with arrows

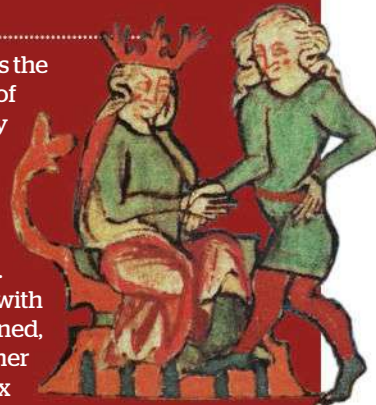


877

The Danes divide the kingdom of Mercia in two, keeping the eastern part and giving the western half to the Mercian king, Ceolwulf

878

The Danish army occupies the West Saxon royal manor of Chippenham, nearly capturing Alfred, who escapes to the Somerset marshes, rallies his people and defeats the Danes at the battle of Edington. Guthrum (pictured right with Harald I Fairhair) is christened, takes Alfred as his godfather and leaves Wessex



879/880

Æthelred of Mercia submits to Alfred's lordship, uniting Wessex and Mercia in a new kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons. Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd is promised in marriage to him

892/3

The statue of Alfred's eldest daughter, Æthelflæd, in Tamworth

893

Bishop Asser writes his *Life of King Alfred*

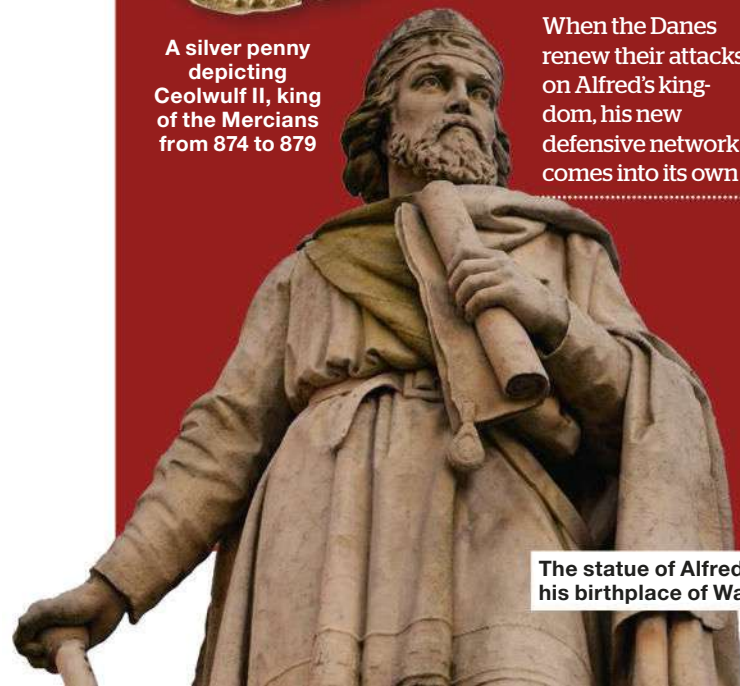
899

Alfred the Great dies and is buried at Winchester. His son Edward succeeds



A silver penny depicting Ceolwulf II, king of the Mercians from 874 to 879

When the Danes renew their attacks on Alfred's kingdom, his new defensive network comes into its own



The statue of Alfred the Great in his birthplace of Wantage, Oxon



879/880, Rhodri's sons are said to have avenged their father by exacting a heavy defeat upon Æthelred of Mercia.

Æthelred was now in an extremely vulnerable position. Not only were there two deadly Danish armies marauding through the land, but he was also at risk of being overrun by a resurgent kingdom of Gwynedd on his western borders. He needed friends, and he needed them quickly – Alfred, who had just secured peace with one Danish army and who was a powerful influence in Welsh politics, was simply the best port in a storm. Through no direct intervention of his own, the union with Mercia fell into Alfred's lap.

Perhaps the greatest stroke of luck that Alfred enjoyed was becoming king at all. At the time of his birth, it must have been considered unbelievably unlikely that he would ever wear the crown. As the youngest of the five sons of King Æthelwulf of Wessex (died 858), the odds were heavily stacked against him.

As it was, fate intervened. Alfred's eldest brother, Æthelstan, predeceased their father. His next brother, Æthelbald, died in 860, followed by the third, Æthelberht, in 865, and, finally, the fourth, Æthelred in 871. Within 20 years, Wessex had lost four king's sons from the same generation.

A lucky land

This loss was Alfred's gain. But the profusion of royal sons – almost unparalleled in Anglo-Saxon history – was also an enormous stroke of luck for the kingdom. Had Wessex had fewer kingly scions there would undoubtedly have been a succession crisis once the last had gone the way of earthly flesh. This is something that the Vikings would have been keen to exploit – their attack on Northumbria in 866 appears to have been timed to coincide with a civil war between two claimants for the throne.

Yet, perversely, being the fifth-born, runt of the litter may also have brought with it advantages. As the last in line, it is possible that Alfred was being groomed for a career in the church. Alfred's much-celebrated love of learning and bookishness may have stemmed from an education that was priming him for a more academic career.

Alfred is the only ruler before Henry VIII whose philosophical writings survive. His translations of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Saint Augustine's *Soliloquies* into Old English are subtly infused with his personal views of kingship.



Alfred in a 13th-century manuscript. "Being the fifth-born, runt of the litter may have brought advantages," says Alex Burghart

"The profusion of royal sons – almost unparalleled in Anglo-Saxon history – was a huge stroke of luck for the kingdom"

These were underscored by his law code, which attached great emphasis on loyalty to the king – likening the relationship between subject and ruler to that between disciple and Christ, and declaring that no mercy could be offered for treachery: "...since Almighty God adjudged none for those who despised Him, nor did Christ, the Son of God, adjudge any for the one who betrayed Him to death; and He commanded everyone to love his lord as Himself."

Such scholarship was typical of Alfred's rule. He understood the power of the written word and obliged all of his nobles' sons to learn to read. He also seems to have commissioned both the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – which charts the West Saxons' rise to fame – and his own biography, Bishop Asser's *Life of King*

Alfred which, though no hagiography, gives an extremely favourable view of the king's career.

If the picture that historians draw of Alfred is sometimes too rosy, it is because the king himself was clever enough to supply a lot of our source material.

This resourcefulness is found in spades following the Viking attack on Chippenham in 878. Such a resurgence can only have been predicated on the loyalty of countrymen, without which he could have raised no army and won no victory. His decision to convert Guthrum to Christianity bound the Viking king to him and neutralised a threat. Never again would Guthrum attack Wessex.

Though a decade of fragile peace followed, Alfred did not stand idly by, but instead organised a flurry of fortification. Towns or forts – known as burhs – had their defences strengthened or established for the first time, and precise arrangements were made for their garrisoning: local landowners were obliged to provide four men to defend each 'pole' of wall (a length of 5½ yards).

So when Danish armies again turned their attention to Wessex in the early 890s, the kingdom was ready. This defensive network and military reorganisation – based partly on earlier Anglo-Saxon systems, partly on those of Alfred's stepmother's father, the French king Charles the Bald (d877) – meant that his son Edward and grandson Æthelstan could conquer the Danelaw, and so establish the kingdom of England.

This is heady stuff, so it is perhaps unsurprising that historians have sometimes got carried away. But in their excitement, they've often overlooked a number of factors – not least, how much of Alfred's success was built on luck. Recognising the role of chance in this fated reign helps bring a touch of realism to the Alfredian tale and, rather than detracting from his greatness, helps show it as it really was. Doing this is important, because it reveals just how fragile the conditions were that surrounded the birth of England. A slip-up here, a Viking raid there, a premature death or an infertile marriage, and everything might very easily have been extraordinarily different.

This is not to say that Alfred was not great – by any standards his was a remarkable reign – but it is to acknowledge that his success did not derive from talent alone, and that the creation of the English kingdom was anything but inevitable. **II**

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Viking slayer

The statue of Æthelflæd that stands outside Tamworth Castle, pictured in the background. Æthelflæd made Mercia a kingdom to be feared, repelling foes from her borders and bringing unruly neighbours under her control

ÆT iron



HELFÆD

lady of Mercia

Alex Burghart introduces Æthelflæd, a remarkable woman who turned a cornered Anglo-Saxon kingdom into a powerhouse that defeated the Welsh and the Vikings



Anglo-Saxon history is full of forgotten heroes. One of the most forgotten and, in some ways, one of the most remarkable was Æthelflæd. Daughter of King Alfred the Great (871–99), Æthelflæd succeeded her husband, Æthelred, as ruler of the Midland realm of Mercia just over 1,100 years ago, in 911. In doing so she became one of the only Anglo-Saxon women to rule in her own right, and a key player in the period that would shape the formation of England.

Rarely has British politics been so turbulent as it was in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. In 866 a huge Danish force had landed in eastern England and systematically started to occupy regions and kill kings. By 877 roughly all of the territories to the east of Watling Street (the A2/A5) – the kingdoms of Essex and East Anglia, East Mercia (the east Midlands), Lindsey (Lincolnshire) and Northumbria –

“Æthelflæd’s dowry was the largest ever given by an English father: the city of London”

lay in Danish hands. Nor were they the only hostile power. From early in the ninth century Norse Vikings (from Norway – and no friends to the Danes) had established bases in Ireland and were using them as springboards from which to launch forays on mainland Britain, attacking and sometimes allying themselves with the Welsh kingdoms. Anglo-Saxon England appeared to be on the brink of becoming Anglo-Scandinavian England.

It was under these pressures – and others from the Welsh kingdoms to the west – that, in about 879, Æthelred, the new leader of the remaining Mercians, chose to submit to King Alfred of Wessex. Asser, Alfred’s biographer, says that Æthelred agreed “that in every respect he would be obedient to the royal will”, and it seems that he was as good as his word. In our

sources, Æthelred is never called ‘king’, only ‘ealdorman’ or ‘lord’ – there was to be one king: Alfred, and it is his name alone that appears on the royal charters and coins of the time.

So seriously did Alfred take this new alliance that he gave his eldest daughter, Æthelflæd, in marriage to Æthelred. Exactly when this happened is not known – Asser says that they were married when she reached the appropriate age, suggesting that she was still too young at the time of the alliance – but it may be that it took place in 886 when, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, “King Alfred occupied London and... entrusted the borough to the control of Ealdorman Æthelred.”

If so, Æthelflæd’s dowry was the largest ever given by an English father: the city of London. For the following 25 years, Æthelflæd appears



An illuminated portrait of Æthelflæd in the 1220 manuscript *The Cartulary and Customs of Abingdon Abbey*

alongside her husband in the sources – a clear indication of her status as the embodiment of this extraordinary alliance. During that time, they began the fortification of Mercian settlements, established their royal town as Gloucester, and captured the relics of the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon Saint Oswald from the Vikings. Then, in 911, when Æthelred died after a rule of 32 years, Æthelflæd took over from him, the clerical scribes calling her ‘Lady of Mercians’.

The ascent of a woman

How did a woman working in such a militarised age ascend the Mercians’ greasy political pole? Ultimately, she was the devil the local aristocrats knew. A new king from Wessex might change things – might put their interests at risk. Their decision to support Æthelflæd is a sign that this daughter of a West Saxon king had come to be seen as one of them.

Another factor seems to have lain in her husband’s health. A later Irish source describes

how Æthelred was very ill for some time (perhaps from as early as 902). If Æthelred spent a long time out of action, it is easy to see how his consort could have been regarded as the obvious successor – in effect, she had already been doing the job for some time.

And what a job she continued to do. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that she built no fewer than nine forts or ‘burhs’, including those at Bridgnorth (912), Stafford and Tamworth (913), Eddisbury and Warwick (914), and Chirbury and Runcorn (915), creating a protective network to defend Mercia against both the Danes and the Welsh. It was this infrastructure that allowed people and goods to be protected against raiding armies and served as muster points for local armed forces that could be hurriedly summoned to launch counterattacks.

In 916, Æthelflæd went on the offensive – apparently in response to the murder of an English abbot. She sent an army to destroy Breconanmere in Powys and capture one of the

Æthelflæd to Ælfwynn

A woman’s place was on the throne

When Æthelflæd died in 918 she was succeeded as ruler of the Mercians by Ælfwynn, her daughter. It is difficult to overstate how unusual Ælfwynn’s succession was. For one woman to succeed another is rare in any era, but in the early medieval period it was completely unheard of. It is the first example of female-to-female succession in Europe, and the last in Britain before the 16th century, when Lady Jane Grey (queen for nine days in 1553) was followed first by Mary (1553–58) and then Elizabeth I (1558–1603).

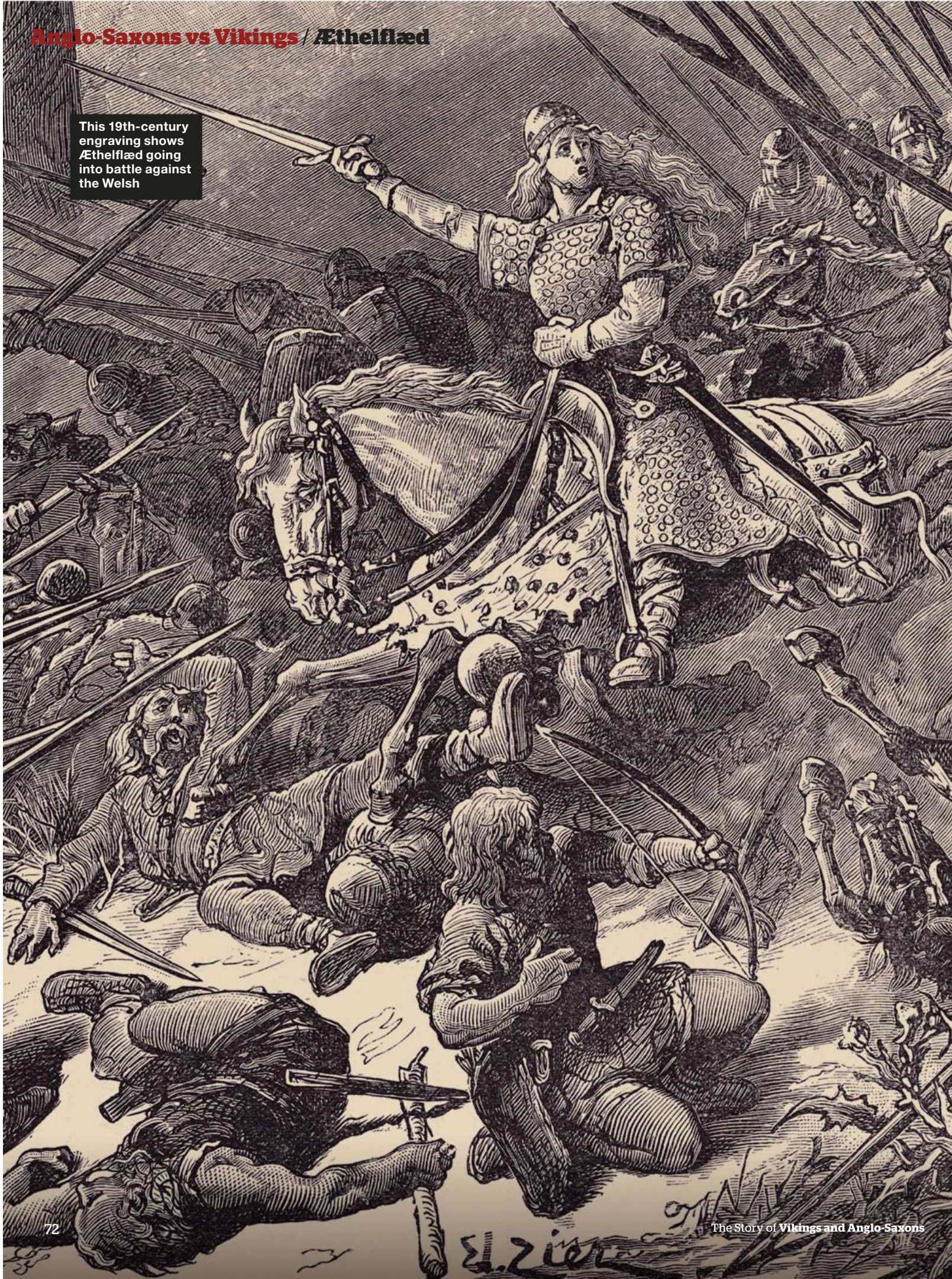
Why, then, did the Mercian bigwigs allow it? Ultimately, they were confronted with the same choice that they had faced in 911 (when they accepted Æthelflæd): either be ruled by a king from a different kingdom who would bring in his own men and ideas, or accept the leadership of a woman who they knew.

On this occasion, however, they did not achieve success. Only six months later, King Edward marched into Mercia and led Ælfwynn back into Wessex, never to be seen again. How well the Mercians took this is not known, but a later historian, William of Malmesbury, recorded that when Edward died on 17 July 924 he had, only days before, had to quash a combined uprising of Mercian and Welsh forces in Chester.



An Anglo-Saxon lady of the 9th century. Ælfwynn’s rule was an unprecedented example of female-to-female succession

This 19th-century engraving shows Æthelflæd going into battle against the Welsh





St Oswald's Priory in Gloucester, founded by Æthelflæd

“Æthelflæd reportedly defeated a Norse army by covering them in beer, then loosing Chester’s bee population upon them”

Welsh queens. Then, in 917, her forces recaptured Derby from the Danes by force (“and there were slain four of her thegns who were most dear to her, within the gates”). At the same time her brother King Edward (899–924), who had succeeded Alfred, had retaken much of the East Midlands, Essex and East Anglia from the Danish forces posted there.

The result was that the surviving Danish armies started to buckle under the pressure. In 918, the army of Leicester peacefully submitted to her; shortly after, so did that of York.

These were altogether extraordinary events. How was it that the battle-hardened Danish armies of the Midlands and north were willing to subject themselves to a woman’s rule? In part it was for fear of the Norse from Ireland; in part, perhaps, because they thought that they could make better terms with Æthelflæd than with her brother, Edward. But it is also possible that, by siding with Æthelflæd, the Danes were trying to show the Mercians that they no longer needed the West Saxons – and so were hoping to split the alliance.

Whatever the intention, soon after (“12 days before midsummer”, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has it), Æthelflæd died at Tamworth – the ancient seat of the Mercian kings – and her daughter, Ælfwynn, was proclaimed her successor. It is clear that King Edward now feared that the Mercians were drifting apart – within six months he had marched on Mercia and, “three weeks before Christmas”, “the daughter of Æthelred, lord of the Mercians, was deprived of all authority in Mercia and taken into Wessex.” The age of Mercian autonomy was at an end.

Even if the legend of Æthelflæd has failed to survive in the popular imagination, for several centuries it excited the medieval imagination. An early Irish writer waxed lyrical about how

she and her husband defeated an army of Norsemen at Chester by first covering them in beer, then loosing the city’s bee population upon them. One chronicler remarks on her cleverness, another on how “her fame spread abroad in all directions”. The 12th-century historian William of Malmesbury went further, calling her “a most powerful man-like woman” (high praise indeed), and his contemporary, Henry of Huntingdon – not, admittedly, a fantastically reliable source – wrote:

“Some have thought and said that if she had not been suddenly snatched away by death, she would have surpassed the most valiant of men.”

This raises a fascinating counter-factual poser indeed – what if Æthelflæd had not been “snatched away by death”? To turn the early tenth century on its head, what if Edward, not Æthelflæd, had died in 918? Would there not have been plenty of aristocrats in Wessex willing to throw in their lot with the daughter of King Alfred and the de facto ruler of much of the Midlands and north? If so, it is likely the unification of England would have taken place not under King Æthelstan in 927, but under a woman – Æthelflæd. And it may have been that her daughter, Ælfwynn, may have succeeded her, not merely as ‘Lady of the Mercians’ but as queen of England.

In some ways this would have been fitting. The weave of British history is particularly rich with women rulers. Indeed, it is a peculiar fact that, from Boudica in the first century AD to Margaret Thatcher in the 20th, Britain has seen more female leaders of renown than any other European region. **II**

Alex Burghart is a historian and one of the authors of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (www.pase.ac.uk), a database of all known people from the period.



A page from a copy of
*Bede's Life and Miracles of
Saint Cuthbert*, showing
King Æthelstan and the saint



927

THE YEAR **AETHELSTAN** MADE ENGLAND

Few dates in the Anglo-Saxon era stand out today. Yet, as **Michael Wood** explains, one year in the 10th century proved a pivotal turning point - marking the foundation of the kingdom of England

There are several English monarchs who, for some reason or other, might justly be described as the father of the English state, but few have quite as direct a claim as Æthelstan.

Just two years after his accession to the throne of Wessex and Mercia, he had expanded his territory from his power base in the south to cover most of what we would today know as England. And arguably the greatest turning point in British history before the 11th century came in AD 927 – the year when Æthelstan created a kingdom of all England.

In early summer of that year Æthelstan overran Northumbria, captured York and called the northern British kings to a pact of mutual peace and protection. A continental poet in his entourage composed a poem remodelling verses originally addressed to Charlemagne, saluting “this completed England”. Æthelstan had become king of a land “which many kings had held separately before him”. Soon on his coinage and in his charters he would be “emperor of the whole world of Britannia” – the most powerful ruler in these islands since the Romans.

Æthelstan had not been groomed to be king of Wessex. However, following the death in 924 of his half-brother Ælfweard, the designated heir, he emerged as king after a prolonged power struggle. When Æthelstan was crowned in September 925, he was the ruler of Wessex (southern England), English Mercia (the west Midlands) and probably East Anglia, not to mention parts of the Danish-settled East Midlands. By 927 he ruled an area far greater than that of his father and, indeed, his grandfather Alfred – the only English ruler honoured by the epithet ‘the Great’.

The English state was essentially created between the late ninth and the mid-tenth centuries, the work of four remarkable rulers: Alfred, his son Edward, daughter Æthelflæd and grandson Æthelstan – together, arguably the most influential family in British history. The England Alfred dreamed was a family project pursued over several generations in a series of remarkable developments in state building, local organisation, the construction of towns, the issuing of coinage, and in the making of English law.

Making the Anglo-Saxons

As seen in the earlier article about our ‘Great’ king, Alfred repelled the Viking threat and established a strong kingdom in Wessex. His son Edward consolidated this position, extending his rule over the Danish settlers in



This coin, carrying the image of King Æthelstan, was minted in Winchester around AD 925–39

“Alfred, his son Edward, daughter Æthelflæd and grandson Æthelstan were the most influential family in British history”

East Anglia and the east Midlands, and eventually imposing his rule on the English Mercians. (Indeed, the term ‘Anglo-Saxons’ at this time refers to the people of Wessex and English Mercia.)

Once Alfred had won his struggle for survival against the Danes he devoted great energy to the founding of towns, the creation of law, and the promotion of learning and literacy. Edward was a great war leader, ruthless and unsentimental so far as we can tell – “in learning far inferior to his father”, wrote one chronicler, “but far surpassing him in power and glory”. Edward is one medieval British ruler of whom we could hope to know much more, but probably never will. However, there have been many discoveries in recent years about his son Æthelstan – enough to demonstrate that he was one of the greatest figures in British history.

This year, 927, was when Æthelstan created England as we know it today in geographical area – crucially, though, not just in territory but also in terms of law, coinage and administration. This expansion in his territory came about initially as a result of a marriage alliance between Æthelstan’s sister or half-sister and the Viking king of York, Sihtric. It’s an extraordinary fact in itself that a Wessex princess should have been married to a recently pagan Viking king, albeit with his baptism as part of the bargain.

When Sihtric died in early 927 his kinsmen from Dublin (his family, the Clan Ivar, were rulers of both York and Dublin) attempted to take control of York. Instead, Æthelstan invaded Northumbria and took York, demolishing its Viking fortifications, distributing the loot and forcing the submission of the Northumbrian earls of Bamburgh, English ‘North-Saxons’.

Æthelstan on the international stage

The diplomacy of Æthelstan's reign included a seemingly thought-out attempt to achieve a pacification of the whole seaboard from Brittany to Norway through a series of diplomatic alliances. He fostered the heir to the Frankish kingdom and sponsored his return to Frankia. He brought up the Breton heir and actually provided military support for the Breton royal line to regain Brittany from the Vikings. He fostered the son of the king of Norway and befriended William Longsword of Normandy. He married four of his sisters to European rulers including Hugh the Great Duke of the Franks and Otto I, the founder of the first German reich.

By these international alliances, he seemed to be trying to broker a pax

across western Europe with a loose-knit group of Christian kings allied by diplomacy, marriage and foster relationships. Disorder was the great terror of the age, and wasn't just the Vikings that caused chaos. Saracens raided into the Alps, stopping the pilgrimage traffic with Rome, and huge mounted Hungarian raids in the 920s and 30s culminated in a great sweep across France in 937.

The tenth century has a bad name in the history books, but it was a formative time in Europe. And, as Æthelstan proved, some of its rulers were impressively far-sighted.

A 14th-century vellum from *The Chronicle of England* showing Æthelstan with Guy of Warwick



*“The year 927 is not just about England.
That was the year Æthelstan also claimed
overlordship of the whole island of Britain”*

Æthelstan's rapid territorial expansion as far as Lothian made him the first southern English king to share a border with the Scots. In light of his new position, he summoned the kings of the Scots and the king of the Strathclyde Welsh to meet him by the river Eamont – perhaps at the great Roman road junction near Penrith, though a later source says that the rituals took place at Dacre, a church near the Eamont with surviving Anglo-Saxon remains.

That meeting in 927 was a symbolic moment. Over the period of Æthelstan's reign, and those of his immediate successors, allegiance to a southern English king was essentially created over all the lands south of the Humber, and the Northumbrians had also come to accept the reality of southern rule. In Æthelstan's new kingdom, there were people who spoke Cornish, Welsh, Cumbrian, Norse,

Danish, Anglian and West Saxon. Æthelstan also established the idea of royal authority, law and coinage over all the lands south of the Humber, and a looser authority to the north. This is what medievalists call the creation of an allegiance, and it is still crucial today, and what all governments aspire to, since it is what lies at the root of all debates about identity and citizenship.

Operation overlord

But 927 is not just about England. That year Æthelstan also claimed overlordship of the whole island of Britain. Up to ten Celtic kings witnessed his charters and therefore paid him tribute in rituals of submission that involved the giving of gifts (and hostages) and the acknowledgement of Æthelstan as 'father and lord'. Æthelstan's charters list the kings submitting to him. Some were his allies – like

Hywel Dda, the great Welsh lawgiver who gave one of his sons a Saxon name and minted commemorative coins on the English model. Hywel seems to have accepted this settlement with the English, whereas the king of Gwynedd, Idwal Foel, was hostile, and eventually died fighting the English.

Æthelstan's great opponent, though, was Constantine, the king of the Scots. Having submitted to Æthelstan in 927 Constantine then broke his pact with his overlord. That led to Æthelstan's invasion of Scotland in the most northerly expedition since the Romans. In turn that prompted Constantine's invasion of northern England with his Viking allies in 937, and his decisive defeat by Æthelstan at Brunanburh, which a later generation remembered as 'The Great War'.

Nothing was certain at this stage. Æthelstan's England was shaken after his death in 939, and might have collapsed altogether. However, the creation of an allegiance under his successors is one of the great facts in early English history – that is, loyalty to the king (or queen) and his or her law. So in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 1051, when the armies of Earl Godwin and King Edward the Confessor were ranged

The 15th-century effigy of Æthelstan in Malmesbury Abbey lies atop an empty tomb. Though the English king was buried in the abbey in 941, his bones were lost during the Reformation



against each other and civil war loomed, peace was brokered because “on both sides were the best men in England” and conflict “would bring ruin to the country”. In other words, they had inherited a sense of England as a nation.

This is perhaps why, in the 12th century, Æthelstan was remembered as a kind of English Charlemagne – an image distantly echoed in several Middle English romances and even on the Elizabethan stage. The Victorians idealised him in stained glass and story books, and on Gilbert Scott facades as a pious Christian empire builder – as they saw themselves.

For us today, Æthelstan’s kingship presents a very different image, marked by the ferocity of his wars and feuds, an empire held together by ceaseless itineraries, and the taking of hostages with enforced rituals of submission. Nonetheless, in a real sense, the state in which we still live has its origin in that pivotal moment in the early 10th century. **11**

Michael Wood expands on these ideas in his book *In Search of England* (Penguin, 2000). This essay is an edited version of his introduction to *BBC History Magazine’s* book *The Great Turning Points in British History* (Constable, 2009)

Bede and the making of Englishness

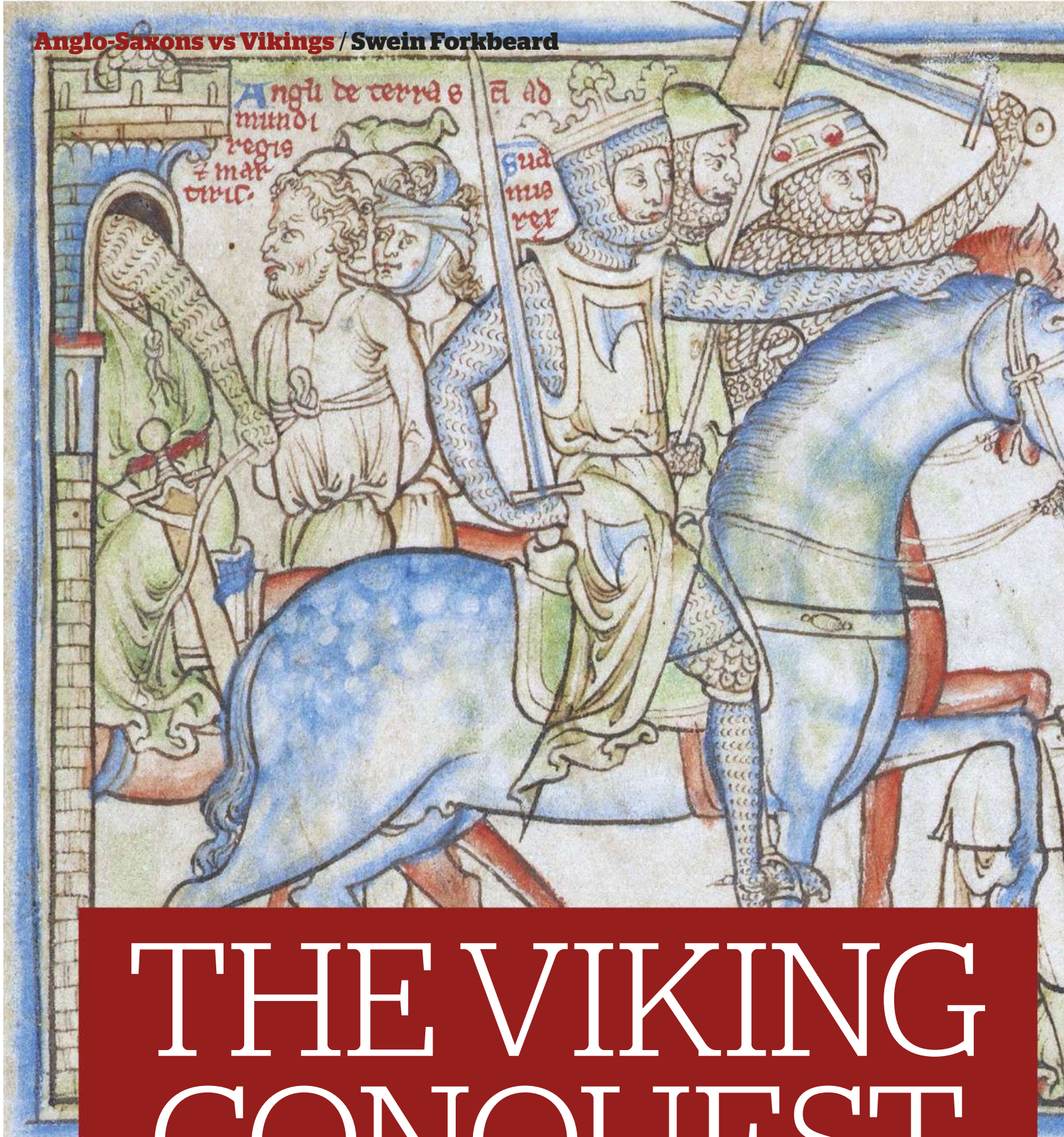
The creation of the early English state was a political and military act, accomplished by war, but it was fired by a big idea: Bede’s vision of the *gens Anglorum* – the English people.

In AD 731 the Venerable Bede, a monk from the north of England, finished his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The shape of early medieval English Christian culture was drawn by

Bede in a lifetime’s work. His book defined the island of Britain as a land of milk and honey, and the English (“not Angles, but angels”) as a chosen people. It’s the blueprint for writings right down to Blake’s *Jerusalem*. His text was translated from the Latin into Old English by Alfred the Great, and Alfred’s grandson was surely driven by the idea of the English people as articulated by Bede.

A 12th-century portrayal of a scribe believed to be the Venerable Bede





THE VIKING CONQUEST OF ENGLAND



A little over a millennium ago, Swein Forkbeard employed superior military strength and tactical ability to supplant the descendants of Alfred the Great. **Sarah Foot** traces Swein's journey from foreign adventurer to first Viking king of England

Just over a thousand years ago, the king of Denmark (and lord also over Norway and Sweden) invaded England with a large fleet. After a brief campaign, he secured the submission of all the English people apart from the inhabitants of London. When, as a near-contemporary English chronicler reported, “all the nation regarded him as full king”, the citizens of London finally capitulated and submitted, giving the Dane hostages, “for fear that he would destroy them”.

That king was Swein Forkbeard. His swift conquest sent the Anglo-Saxons’ native ruler, Æthelred (nicknamed ‘the Unready’) into exile in Normandy, leaving his English subjects to pay a large tribute and supply their conqueror and his army with provisions.

How could a foreign adventurer have brought to such an abrupt end the rule of the descendants of Alfred the Great? How could he have reversed the victory Alfred had won over the ninth-century Vikings, and reduced England to a subject realm within a Scandinavian empire?

The story of Swein’s conquest of England goes back to the AD 990s, to one of the most celebrated episodes in early English military history, reported laconically in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle but commemorated in a famous Old English poem: *The Battle of Maldon*. In the summer of 991, a fleet of more than 90 Viking ships landed in Kent, sailed to Ipswich and, after sacking that town, came into the estuary of the Blackwater river in Essex.

Facing them on the other shore stood the ranks of the English army led by the ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth. When a Danish messenger called across the water to urge the English to make peace and “buy off this onslaught of spears with tribute-money”, so that they need not “join battle so grievously”, Byrhtnoth stepped forward to speak in response:

“Sea raider, can you hear what this army is saying?
They intend to give all of you spears as tribute,
deadly points and tried swords,
payment in war-gear, which will be of no benefit
to you in battle.

Messenger of the seamen, report back! Tell your
people a much less pleasing tale
that here stands with his company an earl of
unstained reputation,
who intends to defend this homeland,
the kingdom of Æthelred, my lord’s
people and his country. They shall fall
the heathens in battle.”

Battle of Maldon, lines 45–54

Determining that the “grim game of battle” would arbitrate between them before the



The hapless English king Æthelred, as depicted in the 13th-century *Abingdon Chronicle*

“The citizens of London capitulated, giving Swein hostages, ‘for fear that he would destroy them’”

Swein's progress

The key locations in the Dane's procession to the English crown

1014 Bury St Edmunds

Saint Edmund exacts his legendary revenge

Bury's monks preserved a legend that the townspeople had resisted paying taxes to Swein, arguing that they paid taxes only to their saint. To prove their point, the martyred Saint Edmund reputedly appeared before Swein at Gainsborough and transfigured him with a lance, so that he died horribly.

1013-14 Gainsborough

Swein establishes a strategic base

Gainsborough in Lincolnshire is where Swein received the submission of Northumbria, of the men of Lindsey and of the Five Boroughs. With good communications, it made an ideal base for the Danish king. Swein died at Gainsborough after having supposedly fallen from his horse.

1013 Winchester

Alfred's former residence falls to the Vikings

Winchester was one of the favoured residences of the kings of Wessex from the time of Alfred; its submission to Swein marked an important moment in his conquest of England. After he became king, Cnut made generous gifts to the New Minster in Winchester.

1013 Bath

The western shires submit to Swein

It was in Bath – where King Edgar (Æthelred's father) had been crowned in 973 – that Swein waited for ealdorman Æthelmær to bring the thegns of the western shires to submit to him.

991 Maldon

Swein outfoxes the English in Essex

It was at Maldon in Essex that Swein secured the key victory in his campaign to conquer England, defeating an army led by Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex. A narrow causeway at a tidal ford separates the town from Northey Island, where Swein's fleet landed in 991.

992-1013 London

The capital wins praise for putting up a fight

London plays a prominent role in the narrative of the campaigns of Æthelred's reign in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The author's account was coloured by his knowledge of the defeat of the English, of whom he was generally very critical, but he praised the city's resistance to Swein.

1002 Oxford

Where Danes felt the wrath of Æthelred

A document from St Frideswide's in Oxford reveals that the church was burned down in 1002 when Danes had taken refuge there to escape King Æthelred's instruction to destroy all Danes "who had sprung up in England like cockle among the wheat".

1011 Canterbury

The Danes put an archbishop to death

Canterbury was besieged by the Danes in 1011 and fell because of the treachery of someone inside the town. The army captured the archbishop, Ælfheah (Alphege), who refused to allow anyone to pay a ransom for him, so they killed him, pelting him with bones and ox-heads and striking his head with an axe.

1013 Five Boroughs

Where the Danes secured the Midlands

The Five Boroughs were the principal towns of Danish Mercia: Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford. Their submission in 1013 provided Swein with a base from which to move south.

1013 Wallingford

Swein crosses the Thames

At an important crossing point of the Thames, south of Oxford, Wallingford is where King Alfred had established one of his forts and a royal mint. On his way from the Midlands to Bath, Swein crossed the river here.

Who was Swein Forkbeard?

The rise of the Danish king who subjugated England

Swein was the son of Harald Bluetooth, the first Christian king of Denmark, who had substantially enlarged the Danish kingdom and been accepted as overlord in Norway. Eager to wield power himself, Swein rebelled against his father in AD 987 and drove him into exile.

Such was the stability of the realm created by Harald that Swein was free to lead raids on England himself without having to worry about his security at home. And his campaign enjoyed the support not only of his own retainers but also of other leading men from Denmark and elsewhere in Scandinavia, who hoped to profit from the treasures he would win.

Swein's nickname, Forkbeard, is first recorded in a chronicle from Roskilde, compiled about 1140. Most medieval accounts of his career followed the lead given by a German chronicler, Adam of Bremen, who denigrated Swein for failing to recognise the authority of the German emperor and for not acknowledging the ecclesiastical authority of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. A more positive picture is offered in a text in praise of Emma, widow of Æthelred the Unready, who went on to marry Cnut, Swein's son. There Swein is praised as a fortunate, generous and religious king.



Both sides of a coin struck during the reign of English king Æthelred. One side shows the king himself, while the other portrays the hand of God

English would pay tribute, Byrhtnoth ordered his men to pick up their shields and walk to stand on the edge of the river, where the flood tide flowed, separating the two forces. Only when the waters receded could the seaborne attackers try to take the causeway, which bold Englishmen defended resolutely, refusing to take flight from the ford.

The perfidious Vikings (as the poem portrayed them) tricked Byrhtnoth into yielding some ground; he then paid the ultimate price for that act of pride, as the poet saw it, of conceding the Danes too much land. Byrhtnoth fell in the battle, with his last breath commending his soul to the Lord of hosts and of angels.

Hateful visitors

The Maldon poet contrasted the heroism and dedication of Byrhtnoth and those who fell with him – loyal followers of a devout lord – with the disloyal and ungrateful cowards who fled the battlefield on their lord's death, instead of sacrificing their own lives to avenge him. Danes ("the hateful visitors") appear as arrogant in their demand for tribute before a blow has been struck; they use guile to gain ground on the English side of the causeway. English valour and moral courage lie at the heart of the poet's message, but the military prowess of the "fierce" Vikings is never concealed.

Though the poem did not name any of the hostile army, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle



Swein Forkbeard drove his own father, Harald Bluetooth, into exile. Here Harald is depicted in a gold-leaf relief from the 11th century



Swein arrives in England in an illustration from the *Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund* (1434–44). The Dane set out to subdue the English through fear – and the strategy worked

“The Danes are cast as arrogant in their demands for tribute but their military prowess is never concealed”

credited Olaf (Tryggvason) with leading the force that attacked England in 991, implying that he fought at Maldon.

However, an independent source mentions the involvement of an Essex nobleman in a “treacherous plan that Swein should be received in Essex when first he came there with a fleet”. This suggests that Swein, not Olaf, took the command. Newly established as king in Denmark, with the substantial power and resources of that realm behind him, Swein made a more plausible leader of this invading force than did the Norwegian adventurer Olaf. He would prove to be a formidable foe.

After a period of relative peace, Vikings had begun again to attack English shores before Swein and Olaf arrived in 991. Swein’s personal involvement represented a new threat: Denmark’s ruler had his eye on the material resources of England, one of the richest kingdoms of its day. Scandinavian adventurers had sought new lands and opportunities in western Europe since the ninth century, but never before had the Danish king himself led their raids.

Swein’s ability to spend so much time on overseas expeditions offers an insight into the security of his power at home. The plunder he gathered in England helped to bolster both his resources and his reputation, strengthening his position on both sides of the North Sea.

Spreading misery

Defeated at Maldon, the English paid tribute to the Danes. Further Danish victories followed in the next three years, with attacks on East Anglia, Lindsey, Northumbria, London, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire until the English again paid tribute.

At this point, in 994, the English king Æthelred succeeded in separating Swein and Olaf by sponsoring Olaf at his confirmation and giving him royal gifts. In return, Olaf promised never to come back to England in hostility, but took his new wealth to Norway and seized the throne.

This forced Swein back to Scandinavia to counter the threat to his own realm. While the Danish king sought to reassert control at home (defeating and killing his Norwegian

rival in 999), Viking armies continued to harry England, levying large tributes and causing significant misery.

Swein first reappears in the English chronicle record when leading the army in an attack on Exeter in 1003, but he may already have returned to England as early as 1000. In 1004 he came with his fleet to Norwich, and burned down the town. Fierce fighting near Thetford brought Swein another victory, and it seemed that no man could defeat him. Then in 1005 a famine struck England, one so bad, the chronicler wrote, that “no man ever remembered one so cruel.” Swein was forced to take his fleet back to Denmark.

The chronicler, writing from London some time after the events, during the reign of Swein’s son Cnut, laid the blame for the recurrent English defeats firmly at the feet of the English leadership. To the chronicler’s mind, the incompetence, indecision and cowardice of those in power weakened the morale and determination of the rank-and-file troops, who often crumbled on the battlefield without offering real resistance. So weak were England’s defensive responses that the Danes went about as they pleased: “Nothing withstood them, and no naval force nor land force dared go against them, no matter how far inland they went,” reports the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Even Æthelred’s drastic strategy of ordering the massacre of all Danish men in



A 13th-century manuscript illustration depicts the killing, according to legend, of Swein by Saint Edmund (who had himself been martyred by Vikings a century and a half earlier)



“Æthelred’s strategy of ordering the massacre of all Danish men in England in 1002 did little to turn the tide”

England on Saint Brice’s Day in 1002 did little to turn the tide of Danish victory, serving only to heighten the population’s fears.

Though Swein stayed in Denmark after his return in the year of the great famine in England (1005), his absence brought no respite for the English. The arrival in 1009 of the “immense raiding army” led by Thorkell the Tall represented a turning point in Æthelred’s reign.

Whether, as one source favourable to Swein maintained, Thorkell came as the agent of Swein or (as is more plausible) he led an independent band of warriors drawn from across Scandinavia, Thorkell’s tactics and military prowess proved more than a match for English defences. Between 1009 and 1012, his army devastated great swathes of England.

As the chronicler wrote: “All these disasters befell us through bad policy, in that they were never offered tribute in time, nor fought against; but when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them. And for all this truce and tribute, they journeyed none the less in bands everywhere, and harried our wretched people and plundered and killed them.”

From an English perspective, the nadir of Thorkell’s campaign came in 1012 following the fall of the city of Canterbury when, on 19 April, his army shamefully put to death Ælfheah, archbishop of Canterbury. In the aftermath of the archbishop’s martyrdom, Thorkell and 45 ships from his army changed sides to ally with Æthelred, promising to defend England.

Northern power base

In 1013, King Swein arrived with his fleet at Sandwich in Kent. He might (as one source maintained) have wanted to punish Thorkell for changing sides. But a close connection between Swein and Thorkell cannot be proven, and other considerations motivated the Danish king, including the desire to now conquer England.

From Sandwich, Swein sailed quickly round East Anglia, into the mouth of the Humber and along the Trent until he reached Gainsborough. Without a fight, Earl Uhtred and all the Northumbrians, the people of Lindsey and of the Five Boroughs, and all of the Danish settlers north of Watling Street submitted to him. This diplomatic victory

gave Swein a power base from which to attack Thorkell and Æthelred in the south.

Having provisioned his army, and equipped it with horses, Swein left his son Cnut in charge in Northumbria and crossed Watling Street. Then he allowed his army to do whatever damage it would, intending to subdue the English by fear. His strategy worked. The citizens of Oxford submitted to him and gave him hostages; so did the men of Winchester.

Only London refused to yield, its citizens resisting because King Æthelred and Thorkell were inside its walls. So Swein turned away to Wallingford, crossed the Thames and went to Bath, where he stayed with his army. All of the western thegns (noblemen) came to submit to him and gave him hostages.

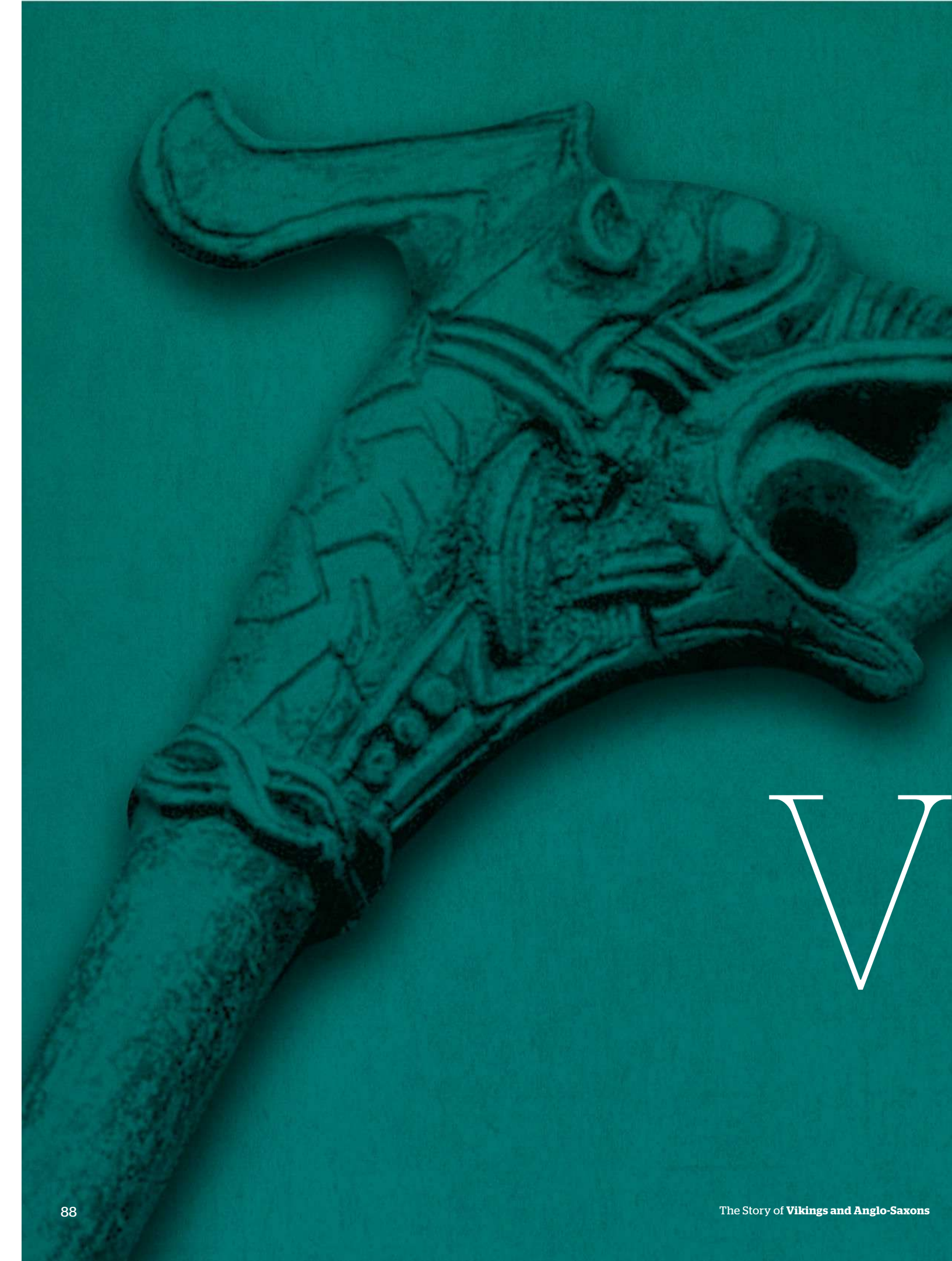
Now, as the chronicler wrote, “all the nation regarded him as full king.” So it was that the men of London also submitted for fear of what he would do to them. And Swein demanded full payment and provisions for his army that winter. Yet, despite it all, the chronicler lamented, “his army ravaged as often as they pleased.”

King Æthelred escaped to the Isle of Wight where he spent Christmas, and then went into exile with his wife’s people in Normandy. For one short winter Swein, the king of Denmark and overlord of much of Scandinavia, added England to his empire. But on 3 February 1014 Swein died, and the fleet elected Cnut as king. The English then thought better of their own king, their natural lord, and begged him to return – “if he would govern them more justly than he did before”.

It would take two more years of heavy fighting, the death of Æthelred (in April 1016) and then of his son Edmund (Ironside) at the end of November that same year, before Cnut would succeed to the whole kingdom of the English and so initiate a period of Danish rule.

Cnut’s ultimate victory owed much to the persistence and military prowess of his father, Swein. From the perspective of 1013, it was clear that Byrhtnoth and his companions at Maldon had fallen to the superior military and tactical strength of the most successful king of the Viking age. **H**

Sarah Foot is the regius professor of ecclesiastical history at Christ Church, Oxford, and author of *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (Yale, 2012)



V



WORLD OF THE IKINGS

Explore the realms of the Norsemen - not merely warriors, but master shipbuilders, weavers, storytellers, adventurers and colonisers of new worlds to the west





The **Vikings** at **home**

Cameron Balbirnie looks beyond the common image of the savage, pagan plunderers from Scandinavia to discover who the Viking invaders really were

Born explorers

The image of the boat was central to Viking culture: the c10th-century Viking stele (left) from Gotland reveals a ship full of warriors. The background picture shows one of Gotland's stone ship monuments. This one is said to be the grave of a mythical Bronze Age warrior called Tjelvar

One of the defining moments of British history provides a vivid image: a small flotilla of boats appears over the horizon, heading towards the Northumbrian shore and the monastery

of Lindisfarne. The date is 8 June AD 793, and no one has told the locals that the visitors have changed the rules. Instead of offering furs from the far north or golden amber from the shores of the Baltic Sea to trade, the Norwegian sailors take a more direct route to getting what they want: plunder, slaughter and enslavement.

The Age of the Vikings has begun – and in just a couple of centuries it changed Britain and its people.

After decades of sporadic raids, in 865 an entire Danish army entered the Humber and sailed up the river Trent, taking the strategic town of Repton in the heart of England. From here, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms began to fall – Northumbria, East Anglia, the fearsomely powerful Mercia. Only Alfred the Great's Wessex halted the Viking tide. A divided England was established, with Danes ruling the north and east under the truce of the Danelaw from Jorvik, capital of the 'Kingdom of York'.

This is the story we are told of the Vikings – and all of it is true. The Vikings were brutal, pagan raiders who shaped the entire future of Britain in just a couple of centuries before the Norman invasion of 1066.

University of Cambridge linguist Dr Richard Dance can reel off dozens of examples of our unseen Viking heritage. Northern words such as 'tyke' and 'muck' come from Old Norse; place names of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire are full of clues. The ending '-by' (Whitby, Derby) and '-thorpe' (Scunthorpe, Cleethorpes) are Viking. 'Eggs', 'skirt', 'sky', 'skin'... all Viking. And next time you see a builder's skip, reflect that it is the Viking word for ship. The Vikings are in our history, in our language and, as scientists have revealed, in our DNA. But just who were they?

Working on the BBC Two series *Vikings* (presented by Neil Oliver in 2012), I wanted to get beyond the legend of axe-wielding men to get to grips with some really big questions. Aware that so much of what we know of the Vikings comes from our own British experience, I wanted to explore Scandinavia and discover who the Vikings really were – the Vikings at home. How did these incredible people emerge?

"The deeper we went, the more dark, bloodthirsty rites came out"

The Viking effect

During the Viking Age, intrepid Scandinavian explorers travelled far and wide and their influence was felt in towns from York to Staraya Ladoga

York

Viking metropolis

York was a unique creation – a Viking city. Founded by Rome, York had already been revitalised as an urban centre by the time the Vikings attacked and took control. But with a population of perhaps 10,000 the new Jorvik was quite an alien place for Vikings to settle naturally. According to University of York archaeologist Dr Søren Sindbæk, the Vikings who came to York were a special breed. "If you end up in towns, something's almost always gone wrong," he says. "The common path was to farm the land."

So here were **immigrant families, living cheek by jowl, trying to adapt to a completely new way of urban life in a foreign country.** On the one hand they would have had access to exotic wonders including rare spices and perfumes. On the other hand, they lived in packed timber houses, surrounded by fetid waste.



The Vale of York Hoard: Viking coins found in 2007 relate to Islam, Christianity and pre-Christian Viking beliefs



A Viking skull in chains at the National Library of Ireland

Dublin

The centre of the slave trade

Dublin was founded by the Vikings as a maritime staging post in which to harbour and repair ships. They invented something called a ship fortress, a defence half on land, half on the water. Dublin and the river Liffey allowed the Vikings to foray into the Irish interior in search of monastic gold and silver, but also an even more important booty – slaves.

Jelling and Ribe

The site of a new religion

Today Jelling is a tiny Danish village, but it is a place central to the history of Denmark, Britain and the end of the Viking Age. **This is the site of the Jelling Stones that combine Viking runes and imagery showing the Christianisation of Denmark.** It was here that Harald I of Denmark, son of the founder of the Jelling dynasty, King Gorm, converted to Christianity and built a church in 965. However, excavations in Ribe, Denmark's earliest existing town, uncovered skeletons of what could turn out to be an entire Christian community that pre-dates Harald's conversion.

Harald's grandson was King Cnut, who we think of as an English king. In fact, Cnut presided over an empire that included England and Denmark as well as pieces of Sweden and Norway. He was a European emperor.

Iron manacles reveal that Viking Dublin was a key slave market and holding centre.

Irish monks writing at the time record that in 871, some 200 ships arrived packed with Angles, Britons and Picts. Apparently the going rate for a male slave was 12oz of silver, while a female fetched 8oz. Archaeologist Linzi Simpson has studied skeletons of some of the earliest of Viking settlers. The bones reveal the toll of both rowing and agricultural work. These people went 'viking' before deciding to make Ireland home.





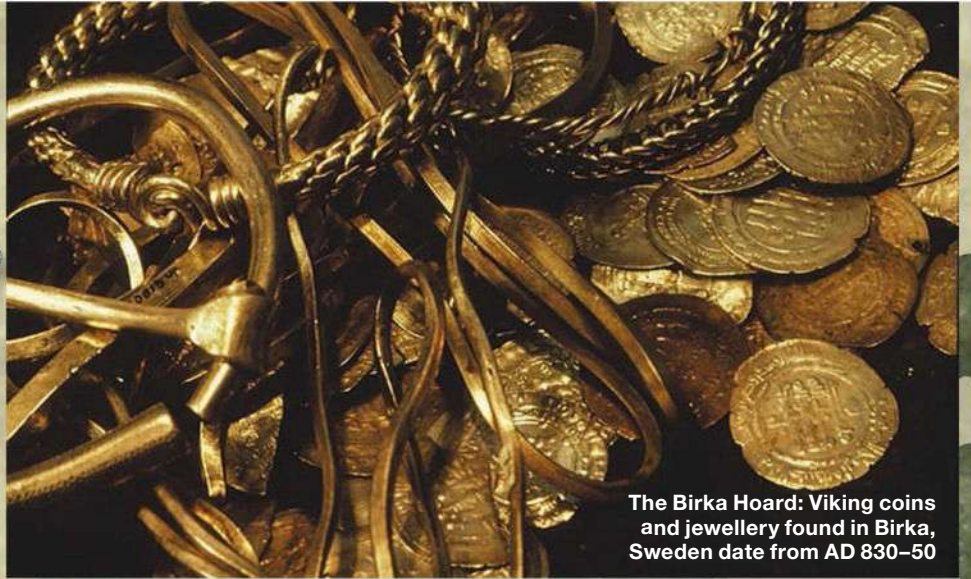
A bronze brooch found during the excavation of Kaupang graves from the late 19th century

Kaupang

A new way of life

Kaupang, a hundred miles or so south of present day Oslo, is considered to be the first significant urban settlement in Norway. Founded around AD 800, it grew to house a population of perhaps 1,000 people. Like most Viking towns it was a coastal centre, trading in iron, soapstone and fish. Excavations since 2000 have unearthed an incredible 100,000 finds including Arab silver coins, glass beads, gold and bronze jewellery as well as countless weapons and tools.

The deep divisions of the Norwegian fjords favoured smaller petty kingdoms for much longer than its southern rival Denmark, which experienced centralised power much earlier.



The Birka Hoard: Viking coins and jewellery found in Birka, Sweden date from AD 830–50

Birka

A melting pot of ideas

Established by the middle of the eighth century, Birka was one of the earliest urban settlements in Scandinavia. Li Kolker, of Sweden's National Historical Museum in Stockholm, describes it as the **Viking version of New York or London, bringing in "a melting pot of ideas from abroad"**.

Birka was connected in a direct line of trading posts all the way to Constantinople. Everything from eastern silks to silver Arabian dirhams have been found here. In the design of colourful jewellery and the remains of clothing, Middle Eastern influences can be seen. Birka expert Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson says that small fragments of kaftans have even been found made of a combination of wool with silk and fur trimmings.

Kaupang

Birka

GOTLAND

Staraya Ladoga

Staraya Ladoga

The oldest trading centre

The Viking settlement of Staraya Ladoga (today 75 miles east of St Petersburg) **was a gateway into Russia and the east.** It has been estimated that between 90 and 95 per cent of all Arabic silver coins found in Sweden, a quarter of a million silver dirhams, came through this single trading town, and Vikings would have also met with Finnish fur traders here.

Wooden houses were in place by 753, well before the earliest recorded raids on Britain, and it might be that Staraya Ladoga is even older than this. The discovery of Scandinavian objects, mainly from the Baltic island of Gotland, suggests that **an international market was already established by the early seventh century, making it one of the oldest of all Baltic trading centres.**

A silver 'valkyrie': in Norse mythology, the valkyrie would choose who lived and died in battle

Jelling
Ribe
Hedeby

Hedeby

The 'debauched' town

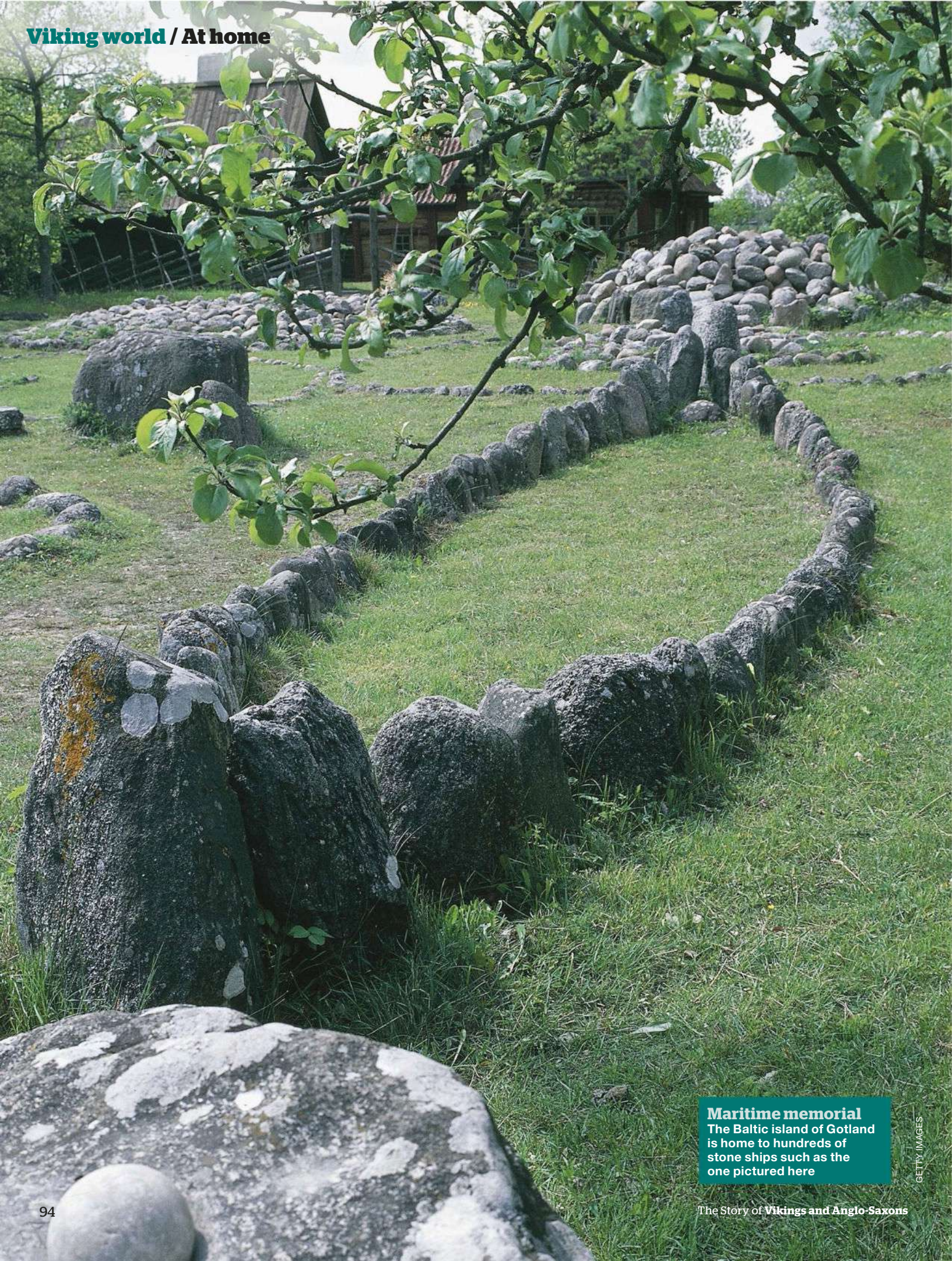
The Vikings did not write their histories, so descriptions of contemporary life are rare, but one 10th-century Spanish merchant recorded his rather scathing impressions of the important Danish Viking town of Hedeby.

Abraham ben Jacob wrote that **both men and women wore eye make-up, that their singing was a rumbling emanating from their throats like that of a dog, but even more bestial, and that women had the right to divorce.** He was not impressed by the place.

Archaeological evidence from Hedeby suggests that the small, tightly clustered houses built around Hedeby's harbour did not have many older occupants. In Hedeby tuberculosis was rife and people rarely lived beyond the age of 40.

This bronze animal-headed cloak pin found in Hedeby is thought to date to the second half of the 10th century





Maritime memorial
The Baltic island of Gotland is home to hundreds of stone ships such as the one pictured here



Hjortspring Boat

This plank-built vessel dating from the early Iron Age was found in the Hjortspring Bog on the Island of Als

Why did the Viking Age erupt so suddenly? And how did the Vikings see *themselves*?

What I found was certainly not a new, cuter Viking. The deeper we went, the more dark, bloodthirsty rites seemed to come out of the woodwork. The Viking Age will always be brutal, but it was also far more complex and fascinating than the standard image of sea-faring warriors fighting for booty and glory. These were people shaped by thousands of years of Scandinavian land and sea. This was a very different prehistoric world to our own, with a culture that developed along its own unique trajectory outside the bounds of the Roman empire.

Archaeological insights

The archaeological sites and conserved Viking treasures from across Scandinavia are simply jaw-dropping. They offer remarkable insights into the lives of the Vikings, the extent of their influence and trade, their strange beliefs, the burials of their kings and, of course, their peerless maritime technology – the original meaning of the word ‘Viking’ was something you *did* rather than what you *were*. “To go viking” was to explore, to adventure.

To understand how the Vikings came to be, I explored the vast and varied lands of

“The original meaning of the word ‘Viking’ was something you did, not what you were. ‘To go viking’ was to explore, to adventure”

Scandinavia. Norway’s habitable land is squeezed between its ragged Atlantic coast to the west and its frozen mountains to the east. Today, as a result of climate change, ancient artefacts are melting out of retreating glacial ice, giving archaeologists the opportunity to examine the remains of hunters and reindeer pastoralists from thousands of years ago.

To the south, Denmark is very different. Jutland forms the gateway to the Baltic; it’s rich in agricultural land, but also has low-lying peat bogs in which many Iron Age sacrifices have been discovered. To the east is Sweden, facing the main body of the Baltic and the eastern lands of Russia and Asia beyond. These lands all had one thing in common, though – the sea.

Where in Britain we have hundreds of stone circles, on the Baltic island of Gotland there are ancient stone ships. Gotland University researcher Joakim Wehlin has studied more than 400 of them on this one island; the largest,

the Stone Ship of Ansarve, is 45 metres long, created using granite boulders 3,000 years ago. There are also intricate rock carvings depicting ships with curved bows, populated by men with weapons and ceremonial bronze horns called *lurs* – today you can see their curved form adorning every pack of *Lurpak* butter. To look at some of these carvings is to look upon the ancient ancestors of the Vikings.

As well as carvings, the remains of actual boats from Iron Age conflicts have also been discovered, complete with helmets, armour and weapons. One such vessel, the Hjortspring Boat (pictured above), is among the treasures of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, and testifies to a long tradition of maritime fighting. It seems that the warrior tribes of the Baltic had been raiding one another for many hundreds of years before they took to the open seas to launch the raids for which they became infamous.



Ripping yarns

Weaving at Jorvik Viking Centre in York. The city had a thriving textile industry

The exact reasons why are not known, but a number of factors are clear. First, the Roman empire never extended into Scandinavia, so the Iron Age chiefdoms remained intact without Roman law, towns or Christianity. In the south there was trade with Rome, bringing a taste for luxury goods, increasing centralisation of power, and an emerging north-south divide.

Soft targets

It is no surprise that, several hundred years later, the first recorded raids on England reportedly came from the Atlantic coast of Norway near today's regional capital of Bergen. There was no land here to accommodate population expansion; centralising mini-kingdoms were competing for wealth and glory; and the region also boasted uninterrupted pagan culture. These were people who hailed the power of the great Norse gods of Odin and Thor, and showed no fear of a single Christian god. To them, the eighth-century wealth of riskily undefended Anglo-Saxon monasteries, perched conveniently right on the highway of the sea, must have seemed like an open invitation.

The first raids might have come from Norway, but it was mainly the Danes who took to occupying large parts of England. From the 870s the city of York became the important Viking trading centre of Jorvik, with families as well as warriors forging new urban lives and mixing in with Anglo-Saxon society.

In contrast with our image of fierce warriors, York reveals the lives of the Vikings at home. Jorvik expert Dr Søren Sindbæk of the University of York points to the importance of women, weaving at home as part of a boom in the textile industry, as well as metalworkers and other craftsmen.

Incredibly, Jorvik was far larger than any settlement in Denmark itself. The riches that Denmark drew from England and the slaves it took from Ireland as well as its strategic position made the Danes the powerbrokers of the emerging Viking kingdoms. But the early Danish settlements in England and Ireland were not the first. That honour went to Sweden's outposts in the east.



Viking valour

A 13th-century saga manuscript from the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík, Iceland



With our domestic focus on the Vikings in Britain, the experience of the east-facing Vikings of Sweden is easy to overlook. As early as 753 they had established a settlement called Staraya Ladoga, east of today's St Petersburg – the very first town in Russia and a gateway to the east.

Having sailed across the glassy Baltic, the Swedish Vikings used lighter inland boats to navigate a whole new continent, carrying them between lakes and river routes. The purpose was largely trade rather than war, and it brought the Swedish Vikings (known as the Rus, from which the name of Russia is derived) into contact with new and spectacular sights, people and treasures.

By 839 the Swedish Vikings had reached Constantinople, a global metropolis of some half a million people. This was perhaps the richest, most civilised and among the most cosmopolitan cities on the planet.

The aristocrats of Sweden had access to goods of unprecedented luxury. Fragments of silk, likely to have been spun in China and woven in the Middle East, have been found in Swedish Viking excavations.

In a single site on the tiny Swedish island of Helgo, archaeologists have recovered an Irish bishop's crozier, an

Boar-helmeted warriors

This eighth-century bronze die from Torslunda, Sweden was used to stamp designs onto helmets. In this case it possibly depicts ceremonial spear dancers



“To explore and prove yourself as a man was everything. In an age of oral history, the most important thing was to be remembered”

Ethiopian Coptic ladle, and a statuette of a Buddha that somehow travelled west all the way from India. Some of the most telling finds of all are vast quantities of coins. These are Arab silver, exchanged along with precious silks and spices for Scandinavian furs, amber and slaves.

Observations from the east

Much of what we know of Viking appearance and belief comes from Muslim writers. A 10th-century Kurdish chronicler called Ahmad ibn Fadlan kept a journal in which he detailed his encounters with the blond Rus. It is through Ibn Fadlan that we have a first-hand account of the burial of a Viking chieftain and the grim realities of Viking belief. The chieftain, it seems, was not only sent to the afterlife alongside sacrificed dogs and horses, but also with a sacrificed slave girl who, according to the writer, had been raped by the chieftain's close followers, supposedly to honour their dead leader. Behind the silks and other luxury goods that came from the east, the Swedish Vikings, it seems, never lost their dark, inner-Viking brutality.

The other great source of knowledge about Viking beliefs comes from the Sagas, written

later, towards the very end of the Viking Age, and largely the creation of an isolated island in the north Atlantic – Iceland. While the Viking Swedes were trading with the great civilisations of the east and the Viking Danes were securing territories in England and Ireland, the Norwegian Vikings, always pressed for land, were launching some of the greatest voyages ever undertaken to the north and west.

Mainly written in the 13th century, the Sagas are tales of a bygone age ('saga' means literally 'what is said'), of the histories and semi-mythical voyages of Viking heroes from around 930 to 1030. It is from these that we learn of the belief that Valhalla, the home of the Norse gods, was open only to mortals who had displayed deeds of valour. To go viking – to explore and prove yourself as a man – was everything. In an age of oral history, the most important thing for a Viking was to be remembered.

Iceland was settled in the late ninth century and became a base from which Norse sailors reached Greenland and North America. The challenging conditions of Greenland and the far north eventually proved too much even for them, but Iceland thrived.

From infighting between Baltic tribes, in just a couple of hundred years the Vikings had

travelled to Newfoundland in the west and Baghdad in the east. But the adventure that had given rise to an age was about to end – not with defeat but with assimilation.

Denmark was becoming a single kingdom under a new dynasty, and one of its first kings, Harald Bluetooth, had become a Christian. With the acceptance of this new religion, after a few bloody teething troubles the Vikings were transformed from pagan outsiders to European statesmen.

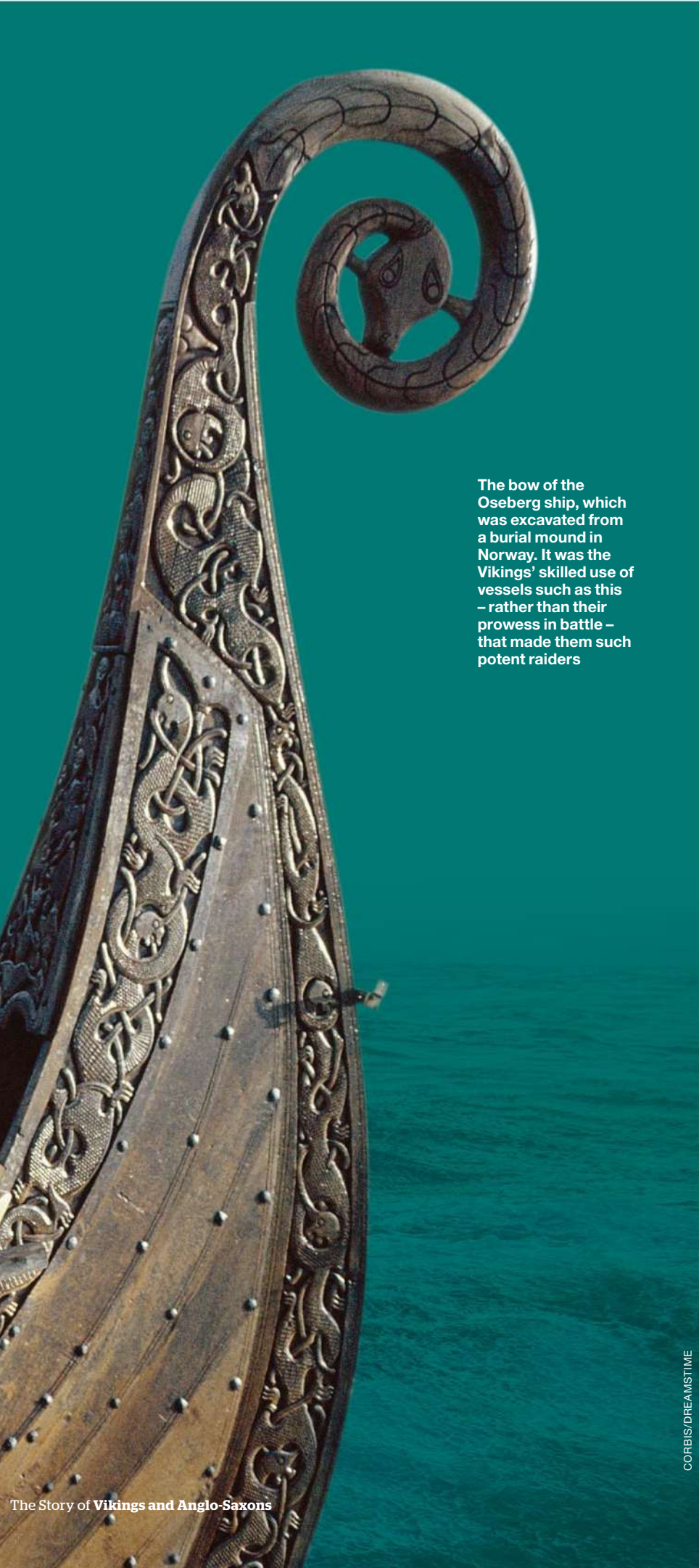
We know Harald's grandson as an English king: Cnut. Our own history remembers him teaching his sycophantic courtiers a lesson by showing that he did not, as they had suggested, have the power to halt the tide. It was a very *maritime* thing, a *Viking* thing to do. Cnut, however, was something new. He was a Eurocrat, king of England but also of Denmark and large pieces of Norway and Sweden. He was present at a papal coronation in 1027 and attempted to align coinage and silver standards across his empire.

Cnut was a Viking in blood, but it can hardly be imagined that the young men who had raided Lindisfarne less than 250 years before would have quite thought of him as 'one of them'. Britain itself stood on the brink of 1066 and a new Norman age – but remember: the Normans were themselves once Norse-men. **H**

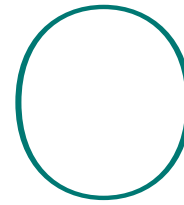
Cameron Balbirnie is a film maker and journalist who worked on the major BBC series *A History of Ancient Britain* (2011) and *Vikings* (2012)

HOW THE VIKINGS RULED THE WAVES

Vikings were famously fearsome warriors, but the real foundation of their success was their mastery of ships. **Gareth Williams** explores the superlative seamanship of the Norsemen



The bow of the Oseberg ship, which was excavated from a burial mound in Norway. It was the Vikings' skilled use of vessels such as this – rather than their prowess in battle – that made them such potent raiders



ne of the most enduring images of the Viking Age in the popular imagination is the longship, with its dragon head, row of shields, and large square sail. Unlike

the equally popular image of the horned helmet (a Romantic fabrication of the 19th century), the longship is a fitting symbol for the Norsemen. The 250 years between AD 800 and 1050 saw a remarkable expansion from the Scandinavian homelands of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, involving a combination of raiding, conquest, peaceful settlement and long-distance trade.

That same period saw the Vikings develop a remarkable network of international contacts that spread from eastern Canada in the west to central Asia in the east, and to north Africa in the south. Many of these contacts were peaceful, and in recent years the Vikings have become known for more than their established reputation as violent raiders might suggest.

Having said that, this reputation was far from unfounded, and would have been all too familiar to contemporaries around the Viking world. The Persian geographer Ibn Rusta's assessment of the Vikings in Russia is damning: "Treachery is endemic, and a poor man can be envied by a comrade, who will not hesitate to kill him and rob him." Meanwhile, you can almost feel an anonymous ninth-century Irish monk's relief as he notes:

*The wind is sharp tonight,
It tosses the white hair of the sea,
I do not fear the crossing of the Clear [Irish] Sea,
By the wild warriors of Lothlind [Vikings].*

This quotation reminds us how much the Vikings' expansion relied on their ships: remarkable vessels that could carry settlers across the Atlantic, trade goods along the river systems of Russia, and be used with devastating effect in raids around Europe.

Charlemagne's biographer, Einhard, tells us that the mighty Frankish emperor ordered fortifications to be built in every port and at

"Vikings crossed the Atlantic, traded goods along Russian rivers and carried out devastating raids" >

A memorial stone from Gotland, Sweden depicts a Viking ship. Artwork celebrating Viking seamanship has been found everywhere from Dublin to Istanbul

the mouth of every navigable river to prevent Viking raids. If this was indeed done, it was ineffective; the ninth century saw repeated coastal raids on settlements such as Dorestad (in the modern-day Netherlands), and up the great rivers such as the Rhine, Loire and the Seine, with Vikings even attacking Paris.

Across the Channel, Vikings were able to sail their ships as far inland as Repton in Derbyshire – about as far from the sea as it is possible to get in Britain. They could do this because their ships were light and fast, with a shallow draft (the distance between the waterline and bottom of the hull). This could have unexpected benefits, as King Alfred the Great discovered to his cost in 896 when Viking and English fleets clashed in the mouth of an estuary in Dorset. During the battle, the ships of both sides ran aground or were beached, but when the tide returned, the lighter Viking fleet was able to float off and escape Alfred's clutches.

Vulnerable targets

It wasn't just the nature of the Vikings' ships that set them apart, though. It was also their ability to use their ships strategically – both along coasts and on rivers – that made them so effective as raiders. It was this, rather than any superior skills in battle (which they often avoided, preferring to hit softer, more vulnerable targets), that made them such a potent force in the early medieval world.

Not only could Vikings arrive and disappear suddenly, but the carrying capacity of their ships meant that they could be used as mobile supply dumps for provisions or loot, without the need for slow-moving and vulnerable supply trains on land. This enabled Viking forces to remain on campaign in hostile territory for years at a time. The 'Great Heathen Army' employed this advantage to devastating effect between 865 and 874, when it conquered the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia, and came close to subjugating the last surviving Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Wessex, in 877–78.

The Vikings' skilled use of ships allowed them to be year-round campaigners, unlike some of their contemporaries, attacking even in the bleakest conditions. The notorious attack on Lindisfarne in 793 – in which Viking raiders apparently burned buildings, stole treasures and murdered monks – was recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as having taken

place in January. Later editors found it hard to believe that they could have launched this attack in the middle of winter, so changed the date to June, assuming that was what the original had meant. In fact the assault could have been launched in January, at a time when it would benefit from maximum surprise.

All the same, Viking ships were vulnerable to bad weather. In 876 a Viking 'ship army' from East Anglia travelling to rendezvous with a 'land army' near Exeter "met with a great storm at sea, and all their ships were lost". Even the discovery of America in the late 10th century, often lauded as one of the Vikings' greatest navigational achievements, occurred when the Icelander Bjarni Herjólfsson was blown off course during a storm on his way to Greenland. According to later saga tradition, he did not land but managed to work his way back to Greenland, where he sold his ship and never went to sea again.

If the Vikings could not control the weather – and Thor, whose hammer created thunder and lightning, seems to have been one of the most widely worshipped gods – they nevertheless had skills in shipbuilding and seamanship that went beyond those of most of their contemporaries. This is not surprising when you consider the landscape of the Viking homelands. With the exception of the Jutland peninsula, Denmark is an archipelago, and Norway is one long coastline, divided inland by the mountains.

Though Sweden has more in the way of passable land, the 11th-century chronicler Adam of Bremen notes that it was possible to travel by ship from southern Sweden to Sigtuna on Lake Mälaren in eastern Sweden in five days, while the same journey overland would take a month. The Franks and Anglo-Saxons may have relied predominately on land travel, but it was the rivers and seas that kept the Vikings connected with each other and offered the best opportunities for wealth and expansion.

As a result, ships played a vital role in Scandinavian society in the Viking Age. Graffiti of Viking ships have been found everywhere from Dublin to Istanbul, and ship designs adorn coins, jewellery and monumental carvings. Even children too young to go on long voyages would be familiar with ships and boats for short journeys, and toy or model ships have been found at Viking sites in Scandinavia and overseas.

"The Vikings' superior seamanship enabled them to attack year round, in even the bleakest of conditions"



Going down with the ship

The importance of boats to Viking burials

If ships were important in life for the Vikings, they also had a symbolic importance in death. Ships were used in a variety of funerary practices, though there is some debate among scholars as to whether they simply reflected the wealth of the deceased – ship burials typically feature other expensive grave goods – or whether they represented the voyage to the afterlife.

The latter can perhaps be seen in the stones (like the one shown left) from Gotland in the Baltic. Designs vary but a widespread combination of motifs on the stones shows a ship below a mounted figure arriving at a hall, sometimes being greeted by a woman bearing a horn of mead or ale. This is usually interpreted as a representation of the voyage to the afterlife, and the arrival of the deceased at Valhöll (or Valhalla), the 'Hall of the Slain'.

There were three separate funerary practices in which ships were directly associated with burial. The first was ship burial itself. Some of these were richly furnished, but others were on a less lavish scale, with smaller boat burials recorded around the Viking world, including examples from Scotland and the Isle of Man. These were the graves of chieftains rather than kings or queens, but still represent significant wealth.

Burial in actual ships was not always practicable. An alternative burial practice was to symbolise the ship by erecting stones in the shape of a ship around the grave, sometimes with larger stones representing the stem and stern.



Stones depict the outline of a ship in this Viking burial near Aalborg in Jutland

A final burial rite involving ships is understandably more difficult to substantiate archaeologically, but has captured the popular imagination more than any other. The idea of burning a ship with its dead owner in it is recorded in a late and mythological account of the funeral of the god Baldr, who was cremated in his ship *Hringhorni* along with his heartbroken wife, Nanna, and a dwarf who was accidentally kicked into the flames.

This story has some parallels with an account by the 10th-century Arab traveller Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who described the funeral of a Viking chieftain on the Volga c922. In this account the chieftain was cremated in his ship along with a slave girl who was sacrificed so that she could accompany her master. This is consistent with the presence in the boat burial of a wealthy man at Balladoole, on the Isle of Man, of a female skeleton showing signs of a violent death.

ALAMY/IAKG/REX



A longship in flames at an Up Helly Aa festival – marking the end of the Yule season – in Shetland. For many, the image of a burning ship is synonymous with the Vikings

Raised from the dead

Evidence of the Vikings' mastery of the seas



1 The longest longship

A section of the bottom of *Roskilde 6* during its excavation in Zealand, Denmark in 1997. This is the longest Viking ship yet discovered and boasted 39 or 40 pairs of oars; a ship bearing more than 30 was considered large.

2 Fit for a queen?

The Oseberg ship, widely regarded as one of the finest finds from the Viking Age. The ship was buried in the 830s, and excavated in 1904. The burial contained two women, with a variety of expensive grave goods, suggesting that at least one of the women was of royal status.

3 In prime condition

The Gokstad ship. Along with the Oseberg ship, this is one of the two best-preserved, and most celebrated, Viking boats in existence. It was built in the mid-890s and buried c910 in southern Norway.

4 The face of power

Viking ships were often adorned with elaborate carvings designed to draw attention to the owner's wealth and status. Contemporary accounts suggest that the finest warships had dragon-head prows. None have survived intact, but they probably resembled this carved post from the Oseberg burial.

The Vikings also celebrated great sailors such as Bjorn Ironside and his brother Hastein, who supposedly led a remarkable raid down the Mediterranean in the mid-ninth century.

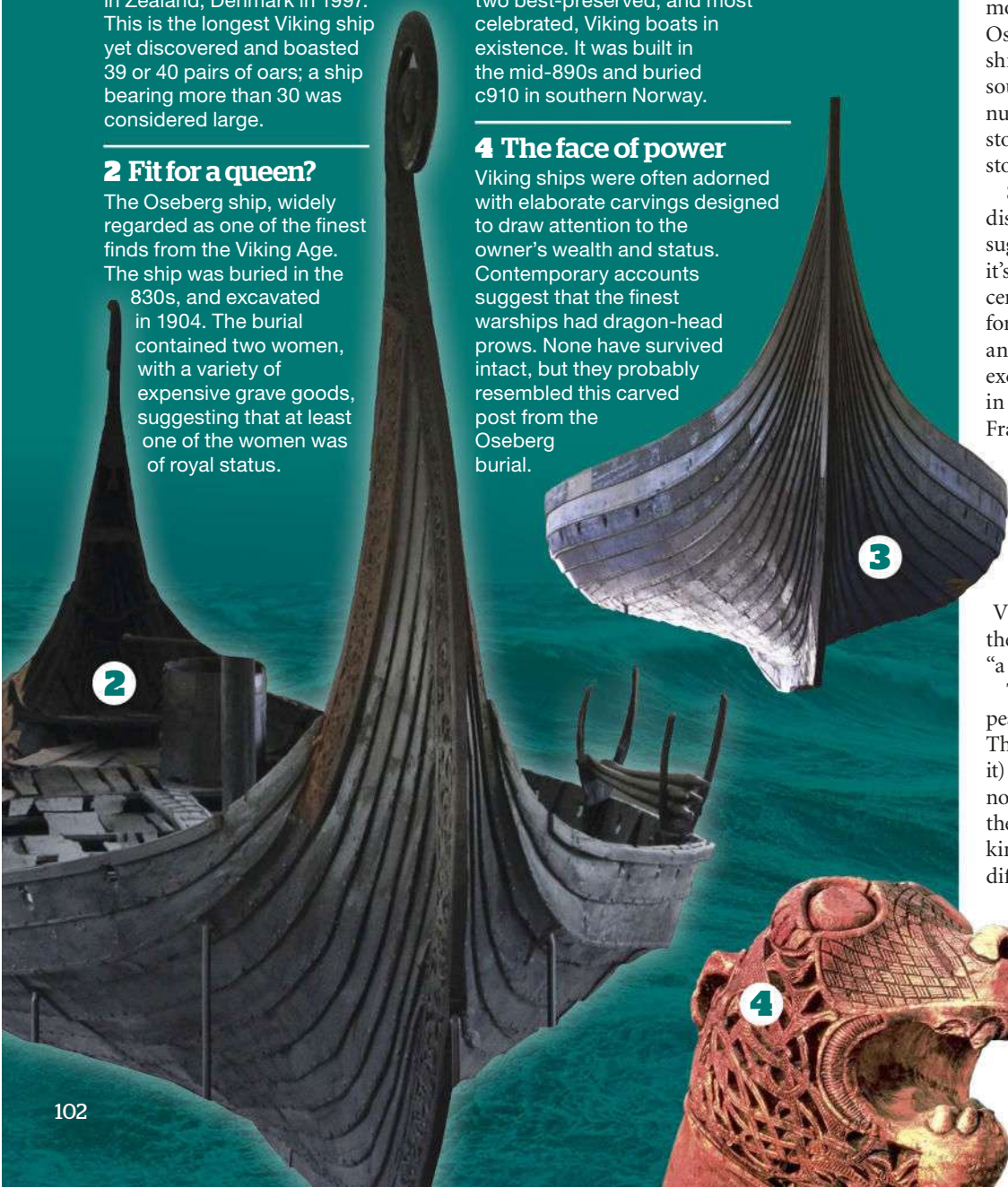
However, not all ships in the Viking Age matched the stereotypical image of the 'longship'. As time went on, the Vikings became increasingly specialised as shipbuilders, creating vessels that were well adapted for particular circumstances. Archaeologists have discovered a wide variety of ship forms, including purpose-built warships (long and narrow) and cargo ships (deep and broad), as well as others that could have combined the two functions.

This last group includes what probably remain the most famous – and certainly the most intact – ships excavated so far: the Oseberg ship (buried 832) and the Gokstad ship (buried c910), both of which hail from southern Norway. Both could carry a large number of men, but also boasted substantial storage space that could be used for cargo, stores or loot.

So were the Vikings raiders or traders? The discovery of the Oseberg and Gokstad ships suggests that they were both. However, though it's possible to distinguish – from the 10th century onwards, at least – between ships built for war and those built for commerce, raiding and trading were by no means mutually exclusive. This is nowhere more apparent than in the slave trade. Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Frankish sources reveal extensive raiding not just for loot but also for prisoners who could then be either ransomed or sold as slaves. In 821, Vikings seized "a great number of women" from the Howth peninsula, north of Dublin, and took them into captivity. Fifty years later, in 871, Viking raiders from Dublin returned from the British kingdom of Strathclyde with "a great prey of Angles, Britons and Picts".

The same Vikings might well be pirates or peaceful traders as circumstances demanded. The legitimacy of Viking activity (or the lack of it) probably depended in part on perspective, not least because the Vikings' activities took them not just across the borders of different kingdoms but also across the boundaries of different legal practices and social customs.

There are similarities here with Elizabethan sea captains such as Raleigh and Drake – romantic heroes to the English, heretic pirates to the Spanish. There are also echoes of the Vikings' exploits in the China traders of the 19th century, another group of





A depiction of Cnut the Great in a 14th-century genealogical roll of the kings and queens of England. Was *Roskilde 6* built for this powerful Danish king of England?



These early ninth-century coins depicting Viking ships were minted in Denmark

adventurers who trod a fine line between legal and illegal activity, and whose remarkable seamanship enabled them to develop trading links across the globe.

If you're looking for evidence of the sheer geographical scale of the Vikings' maritime influence, then the discovery of vast numbers of Islamic coins in their hoards – along with whalebone from the north Atlantic and fragments of silk, both found in Viking towns such as Dublin and York – is surely it.

Status symbols

Viking ships were not, however, simply functional means of navigating the world's oceans. Among a people who prized the virtues of seamanship so highly – and who loved to flaunt their riches – a ship also represented a major symbol of wealth and status.

Even relatively small boats required a significant investment in labour. But the resources needed for building large ships were massive, including not just a combination of unskilled labour and large quantities of timber, but also iron for rivets, wool or linen for sails, horse-hair, hide and flax or lime-bast for cordage. Ships were also routinely decorated with elaborate carvings or ornamented with precious metal, as this passage from the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (1041–42) reveals: "Such, also, was the decoration of the ships, that... to those who were looking from afar they seemed [to be made] more of flame than of wood... Here shone the gleam of weapons, but there the flame of hanging shields. Gold burned on the prows, silver also shone on ships of various shapes."

Individual vessels became famous in their own right, as well as providing a reflection of their owner's spending power and status. For

"Among a people who prized the virtues of seamanship so highly, a ship was a major symbol of wealth and status"

example the *Long Serpent*, boasting 34 rowing benches, was built for King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway just before AD 1000, and was long remembered as the largest ship ever built. The Icelandic saga compiler Snorri Sturluson, writing around 230 years later, noted that the stocks on which the ship had been built were still visible in his own time.

During the building of this ship, the prow-wright Thorberg Shave-stroke had been so disappointed with the design that one night he vandalised it, hacking wedges out of the planks. When King Olaf discovered the damage he threatened to kill the perpetrator. Shave-stroke owned up to the king, explaining that he felt the planking had been executed poorly and requesting the chance to fix it, on pain of death if his work did not please Olaf. In the end the king was so impressed with Shave-stroke's changes that he was put in charge of completing the *Long Serpent* and went on to become a 'celebrity' shipbuilder.

Even more impressive than the *Long Serpent* was the longship known as *Roskilde 6*. At over 37 metres, this is the longest Viking ship yet discovered. It was excavated in 1996–97 (along with eight later ships) during the construction, as chance would have it, of an extension of the Viking Ship Museum at Roskilde.

Anything over 30 pairs of oars was considered large in the Viking Age. With 39 or 40, *Roskilde 6* was exceptional, and there is

also evidence that the ship was decorated with ornamental carving.

Both the size and the ornamentation suggest a very high-status vessel – possibly one built for a king, or at least for the royal fleet. Intriguingly, analysis of the timbers shows that the ship was constructed in southern Norway around AD 1025. Cnut the Great conquered England in 1016, and ruled both England and Denmark until his death in 1035. In 1028 he also conquered Norway, driving his rival Olaf Haraldsson (later Saint Olaf) into exile, and creating a North Sea empire unparalleled before or since. *Roskilde 6* may have been built by Olaf in an attempt to resist Cnut's expansion, but it could also have been made for Cnut to celebrate his conquest of the timber resources around the Oslo Fjord.

The surviving timbers of *Roskilde 6* were reassembled for exhibitions in Copenhagen, London and Berlin in 2013–15. It is a magnificent sight and there can be little better confirmation of the Vikings' skills in shipbuilding and the importance of the sea to their colourful history. **E**

Gareth Williams is curator of early medieval coinage at the British Museum in London, where he curated the 2014 exhibition *Vikings: Life and Legend*, which featured the reassembled remains of longship *Roskilde 6*



A statue of Ingólfr Arnarson, the Norwegian explorer who led the first successful colonising expedition to Iceland in AD 874

ALAND WITHOUT KINGS

When Vikings colonised Iceland in the 870s, they established a society in which local chieftains, not distant monarchs, held the reins of power. **Philip Parker** tells their story

DREAMSTIME/ALAMY

A view of Þingvellir National Park in western Iceland. It was here, in AD 930, that Viking settlers established the first pan-Icelandic assembly – possibly the oldest parliamentary body in the world

About 50 years after their raids first spread terror along the coastlines of north-western Europe, the Vikings struck westward. This time some of them sailed not in search of treasure or slaves but as land-hungry warriors seeking safe havens in which to found colonies away from increasingly powerful Scandinavian kings.

Using the Faroe Islands as a stepping stone, the Vikings could reduce the risks of long voyages across the open waters of the Atlantic. By the 830s a territory in the North Atlantic had been discovered by pioneers including Flóki Vilgerðarson, who dubbed it Ísland (Iceland), in memory of the chilly winter he spent there.

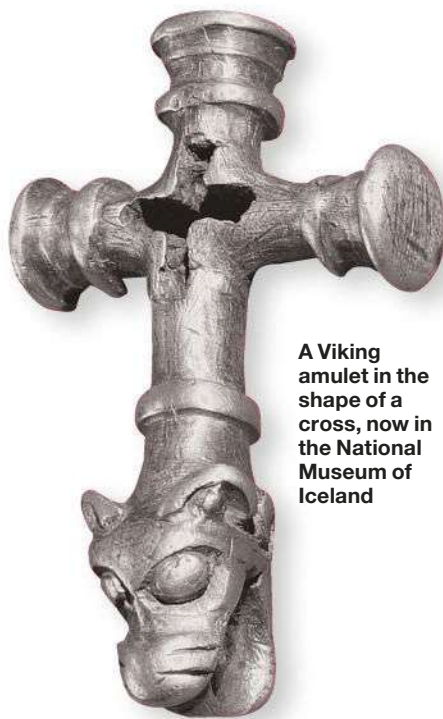
However, these were strictly exploratory voyages. The first successful colonising expedition arrived later, in AD 874, led by the Norwegian Ingólf Arnarson. The following decades saw streams of settlers from Norway and the Viking colonies in the British Isles arrive in a great *landnám* ('taking of the land'), and within 60 years almost all of the available territory had been claimed.

Free from the direct control of the distant Norwegian monarchs, who were much too preoccupied with their own struggles against rival magnates to interfere with the new colony, the Icelandic Vikings were able to dispense with the authority of kings. Left to their own devices for three centuries, they created a unique form of society that came to be known as the 'Icelandic Commonwealth'.

Much about Iceland was familiar to the settlers: it was indented with fjords, at the heads of which they could establish farms. Yet this new environment was not as fertile as the Scandinavian lands they had left behind. Much of the interior was uninhabitable, studded with volcanoes and covered with great glaciers such as the Vatnajökull, and too cold for much of each year to support agriculture.

Though there were swathes of woodland, mostly native birch, these were soon felled for firewood and building, resulting in erosion that reduced the soil's fertility still further. The minimal agriculture possible was, therefore, pastoral, mainly cattle herding, supplemented by fishing and seal hunting.

These settlers lived at the edge of subsistence, and a cold or wet summer could lead to famine. Population density was low: Iceland's first census, taken in 1095, counted 4,560 free farmers, which probably equates to a total population of around 10 times that number. Settlements comprised farms clustered around the longhouses of local chieftains. Farms were constructed largely



A Viking amulet in the shape of a cross, now in the National Museum of Iceland

"The Althing acted as a safety valve for often bloody feuds – an arena in which settlements could be negotiated before conflict got out of hand"

with turf, and within them families cooked, ate and slept in a single long room.

This way of life bred a fierce independence. The Icelandic sagas (see the box on page 107) tell that the original colonisers of Iceland fled the tyranny of the Norwegian king Harald Finehair. Though several of his successors planned to force the colony's obedience to the crown, the difficulties of launching such a venture to a far-flung island meant that nothing came of the idea for almost 300 years.

With no threat of invasion, there was little need to establish a central tax-raising authority to fund defence, and no Icelandic king arose to challenge his Norwegian counterpart. Instead, power devolved to the level of local chieftains called *goðar*. There were 39 of these, spread across the four quarters (or *várthing*) into which Iceland came to be divided. But the *goðar* did not rule territorial domains in the manner of European feudal aristocrats; rather, their authority rested on the allegiance of

retainers (or *thingmenn*) whose lands often intermingled with those owing loyalty to other *goðar*. If a *thingmann* found himself at odds with his chieftain, he could transfer his loyalty to another by declaring himself 'out of *thing*' with the first.

This early period of 'taking of the land' is described in the *Landnámabók*, a 13th-century compilation of earlier sources, which details the names, ancestry and notable deeds of the first settlers in each district.

Once this initial phase of settlement was over, territorial disputes inevitably erupted. The danger of uncontrollable feuds prompted the settlers to formalise what had, until then, been a somewhat haphazard political system – and so, in AD 930, they established the *Althing*: the first pan-Icelandic assembly.

The *Althing* has a good claim to being the world's oldest parliament. It was modelled on smaller meetings held in Scandinavia, where all free men had a right of hearing.

The settlers chose a suitably spectacular setting for this assembly – a site on the Öxará river in the south-west of the island, fringed by a volcanic cleft. The location was as accessible as it was spectacular, and *goðar* and their *thingmenn* journeyed there from across the island when the assembly convened in mid-June each year.

Local courts

At the *Althing*, the chieftains gathered with their retainers, serving as lawmakers – reviewing existing laws and making new ones – and as judges, presiding over cases that could not be decided in local courts.

The gathering was overseen by the *lögretta*, the legislative council led by a *lögsögumaðr* or lawspeaker who recited one-third of the Commonwealth's laws from a great rock at the centre of the assembly site each year. It was a very public form of parliament and judiciary.

The requirement for all the *goðar* to attend meant that, though feuds – often bloody – did arise, the *Althing* acted as a safety valve, a neutral arena where settlements could be negotiated before conflict got out of hand.

By the 12th century, Icelandic society had begun to change, swayed by external influences – most notably Christianity. Missionaries had earlier attempted to preach in Iceland, though with little success until a concerted effort by the Norwegian king Olaf Trygvason led Thorsteinn Thorkelsson, the lawspeaker of the *Althing*, to declare in AD 1000 that Iceland should be Christian.

As money and land was bequeathed to the church, much of it came under the control of local landowners, and the *goðar* grew in wealth, consolidating their power. A number of chieftaincies fell into the hands of just



Early settlers in Iceland had fled King Harald Finehair of Norway, shown in the *Flateyjarbók*

a few families or even single individuals so, by about 1220, political power had become the exclusive preserve of just six families.

The remaining *goðar* ruled over what were effectively mini-kingdoms and, as the rewards of power grew, so did the violence the *goðar* employed to preserve and enlarge their territories. From the late 12th century, Iceland was riven by civil wars, characterised by large-scale pitched battles quite unlike earlier feuds.

Loose alliances coalesced around two powerful families, the Oddi and the Sturlungar. The latter had close ties with the royal family of Norway, whose authority had grown far stronger in the previous three centuries and now had the resources to meddle in the Icelandic civil wars.

The long reign of King Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63) saw the Norwegians gradually increase their influence in Iceland as the Sturlungar and Oddi tore the Commonwealth apart. Among the casualties of the conflict was the great Icelandic poet and historian Snorri Sturluson, murdered in 1241 on the orders of King Hákon, reputedly for his part in a conspiracy to depose him.

Battle-weary, despairing and seeing in continued independence only continued bloodshed, the Icelandic chieftains pledged their allegiance to the Norwegian king at the *Althing* in 1262. It was an ignominious end to the Icelandic Commonwealth, and brought to a close the experiment of rule without kings.

So it happened that, four centuries after their ancestors had fled Norway to escape the oppression of Harald Finehair, the Icelanders found themselves firmly under the thumb of his royal descendants. **11**

Philip Parker is a writer and historian specialising in late antiquity and early medieval Europe, and author of *The Northmen's Fury: A History of the Viking World* (Vintage, 2015)

The sagas of Iceland

What can epic tales of war and exploration tell us about Viking Iceland?

Among the key sources for Viking history are the sagas, tales of heroism, feuding and exploration that probably began in oral form before being written down, mainly in Iceland, around the 13th century.

Some of the sagas have a historical core, such as the *Orkneyinga Saga* that tells the history of the earls of Orkney, or the *Vinland Sagas* recounting Viking voyages of exploration in North America. Even these are distorted by the demands of storytelling and the interest of the authors in glorifying one family or group's deeds over that of another. So, for example, it is almost impossible to determine from the evidence in the sagas exactly which parts of the Americas were visited by the Vikings.

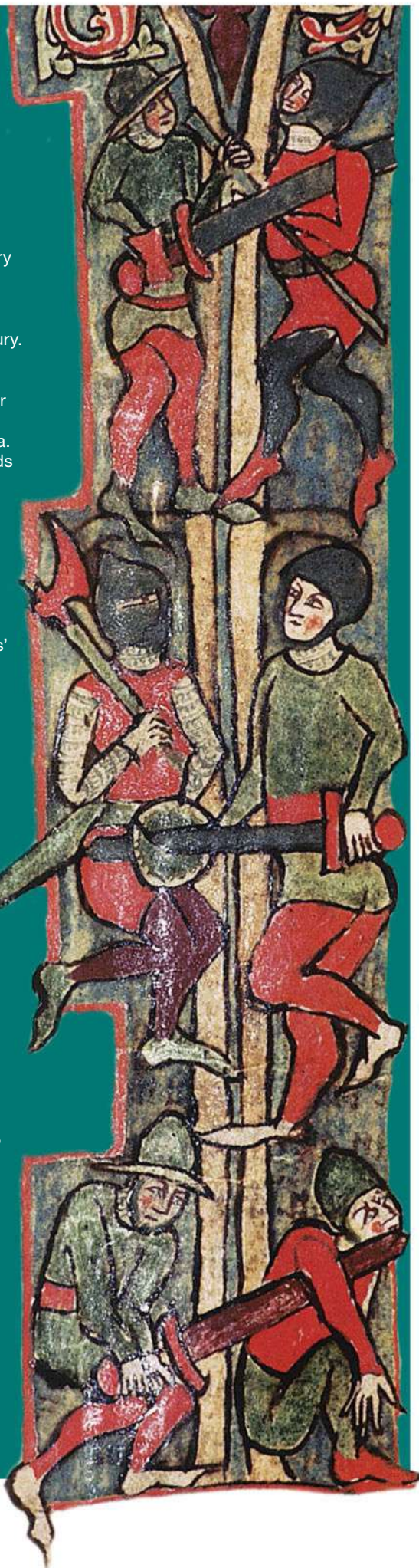
The largest group of sagas are the *Íslendingasögur*, 'Icelandic family sagas' set mainly in the first century of the Viking colony in Iceland. They tell of conflicts between Iceland's major families, and the often tragic outcome of feuds between larger-than-life personalities over seemingly trivial slights, with the events often unfolding over several generations.

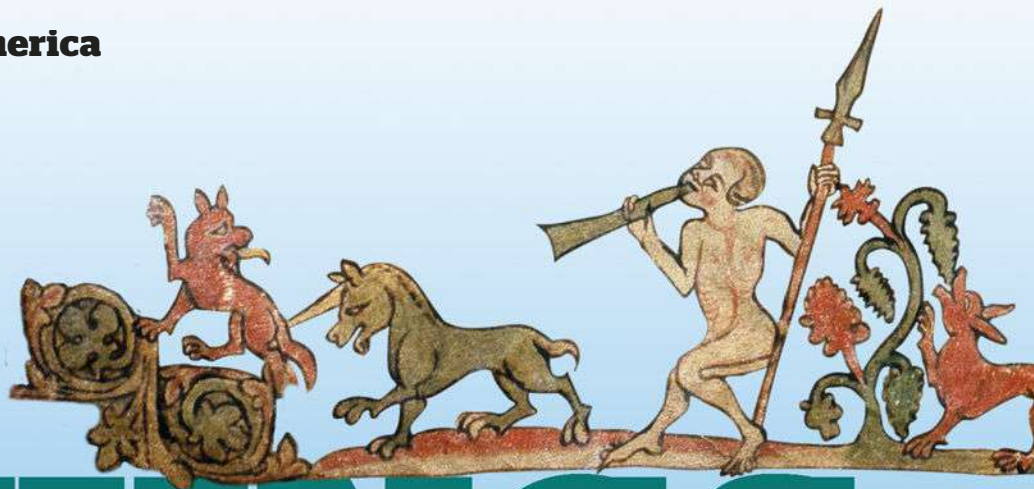
Njáls Saga tells how Njáll Thorgeirsson is sucked into the feuds sparked by the murderous behaviour of his friend Gunnar Hámundarson. Njáll was burnt to death in his farmstead by a posse bent on revenge for the murder of one of Gunnar's cousins by Njáll's son.

The sagas provide a vital source of evidence about the organisation of Viking society, and offer us a unique window on those elements within it that are overlooked by more conventional history.

For example, the *Saga of the Greenlanders* documents the story of Freyðís, daughter of Erik the Red (discoverer of Greenland), who organised and led a voyage to North America; this gives us an insight into the powerful role some women played in trading missions. The role of Gunnar's wife, Hallgerð, in provoking the saga's central feud also shows that Viking women did not play a purely passive role in the quarrels of their menfolk.

The 14th-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók* shows the exploits of Olaf Tryggvason





VIKINGS IN



A reconstruction of a Viking church and workshop near the Norse settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada
TOP: A scene from the series of Icelandic sagas, short stories and poems called the *Flateyjarbók*, which includes accounts of Viking voyages to North America



AMERICA

John Haywood tells the epic story of a small band of Scandinavian explorers who went where no European had gone before, 500 years ahead of the voyages of Columbus



The first encounter between Europeans and Native Americans did not go well for either side.

Around AD 1000, Leif Eriksson had sailed west from the newly established Norse colony in Greenland and discovered a fair land he named Vinland. Three years later, his brother Thorvald was in the second summer of a follow-up expedition. Thorvald and his men were exploring a headland at the mouth of a fjord when they spotted three humps on a sandy beach. On further investigation, the humps turned out to be canoes, under which were cowering nine men. The Norsemen captured and killed eight of these men but the ninth escaped and raised the alarm.

Later the same day, Thorvald and his men saw a swarm of canoes sailing down the fjord towards them. Outnumbered, they took refuge in their ship and, with the advantage of iron weapons, beat off the attack. However, during the fight Thorvald received an arrow wound in the armpit and died shortly afterwards. At his request, Thorvald's men gave him a Christian burial on the headland, marking his grave with crosses at his head and

feet. Leif had been the first European to set foot on the American continent; Thorvald was the first to be buried there.

Because of the subsequent history of the Americas, the Norse discovery of America has become one of the most studied aspects of the Viking Age (c800–1100), a period that saw Scandinavian raiders, traders and settlers active across much of Europe and as far south as north Africa's Mediterranean coast and as far east as Baghdad. Collectively, Viking Age Scandinavians knew more of the world than any previous Europeans. As the only proven pre-Columbian European contact with the Americas, the fascination with the Norse discoveries is understandable. But do they really merit all the attention?

The Norse route to America is sometimes described as 'the stepping stone route' because it proceeded in stages, from one island group to another with relatively short open-sea crossings between them.

The first step on the way came – 200 years before Leif's discovery of Vinland – with the conquest and colonisation of Scotland's Northern Isles soon after 800. This was followed about 25 years later by the settlement of the Faroe Islands and then Iceland in c870. The next step was the foundation of the Norse Greenland colony by Erik the Red in the 980s. As Greenland is geologically part of the North American continent, this ought to be regarded as the first European settlement in the Americas, though it is rarely recognised as such.

The first sighting

The settlement of Greenland was quickly followed by the first European sighting of the North American continental mainland, a feat achieved by an Icelandic merchant called Bjarni Herjolfsson.

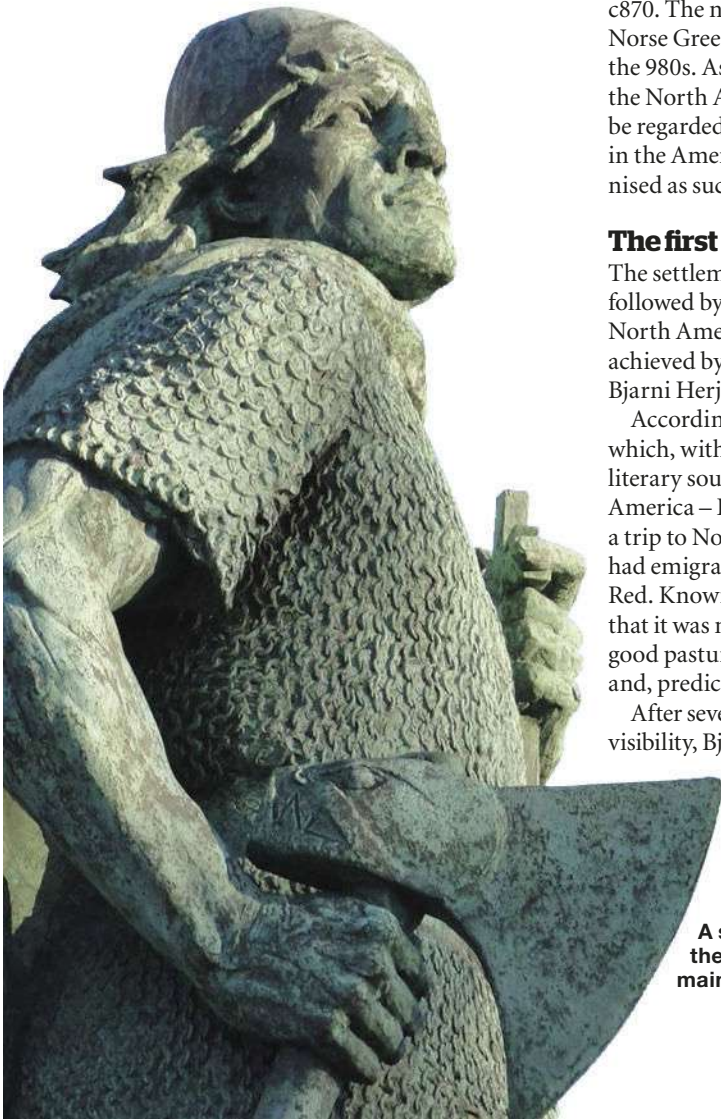
According to the *Saga of the Greenlanders* – which, with *Erik the Red's Saga*, is our main literary source for the Viking discovery of America – Bjarni had returned home from a trip to Norway in 986 to find that his father had emigrated to Greenland with Erik the Red. Knowing nothing about Greenland, save that it was mountainous, treeless and had good pastures, Bjarni set off after his father and, predictably, soon got lost.

After several days of bad weather and poor visibility, Bjarni found himself off the coast of a densely forested, hilly land. This was obviously not Greenland so, without even landing, Bjarni



sailed north and after two days sighted a flat, forested land. Once again, he didn't land. After sailing north-east for another three days, Bjarni encountered a rocky, mountainous, glaciated land that he thought too barren to be Greenland. Putting the land astern, Bjarni sailed east, and four days later arrived at the Norse settlement in Greenland.

Bjarni's discoveries excited a lot of interest and, when he decided to give up trading, Erik the Red's son Leif Eriksson bought his ship and set off on a follow-up expedition around the time that Iceland converted to Christianity – around AD 1000. Leif began by reversing Bjarni's course. Sailing north-west, Leif came to a land of bare rock and glaciers which he called Helluland ('Slab Land'). Turning south, Leif next came to a low forested land with white sand beaches that he decided to call Markland ('Forest Land').



A statue of Leif Eriksson – the first European to land on mainland America – in Reykjavik

Viking voyages across the Atlantic



Sailing south-west for two days, Leif discovered a land where the rivers teemed with salmon and grapes grew wild. This Leif called Vinland ('Wine Land'). The party built houses at a place afterwards called Leifsbuðir ('Leif's booths'), where they spent a comfortable winter. "The country seemed to them so kind that no winter fodder would be needed for livestock: there was never any frost all winter and the grass hardly withered at all."

The winter days were much longer than they were in Greenland and "on the shortest day of the year, the sun was visible in the middle of the afternoon as well as at breakfast time." Come the spring, Leif and his men cut a full load of timber – wood was always in short supply in Greenland – and set off home.

Leif made no contact with native peoples; that fatal first encounter took place during his brother Thorvald's follow-up expedition.

"Leif Eriksson's half-sister Freydis played her part in repelling the Native American attack, terrifying them by baring one of her breasts and beating it with a sword"

Thorvald's death at the hands of Native Americans was not enough to deter at least two attempts by the Norse to settle in Vinland. The first, about two years after Thorvald's death, was led by Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelandic merchant, who took with him his wife Gudrid, 65 men, five women and a variety of livestock.

The party sailed from Greenland and spent an uneventful winter at Leifsbuðir, during which time Gudrid gave birth to a son, Snorri

– the first European to be born in America. In the spring, the party had its first encounter with Native Americans, who turned up at Leifsbuðir to trade furs. The Norse called them 'Skrælings', perhaps meaning 'screamers'. Coming from a Stone Age culture, the Skraelings were fascinated by the Norsemen's iron weapons and tools but Karlsefni forbade his men to trade them.

During a second encounter later in the summer, one of Karlsefni's men killed



Olof Ohman stands by the runestone he 'discovered' in Minnesota in 1898

America's Viking hoax

Why evidence of a Scandinavian colony in Minnesota doesn't stand up to scrutiny

In 1898 a Swedish emigrant called Olof Ohman made a sensational discovery on his farm near Kensington, Minnesota. It was a flat stone with a runic inscription: *"Eight Goths and 22 Norwegians on an exploration journey from Vinland to the west. We had camp by two skerries one day's journey north from this stone. We were out [to] fish. One day after we came home [we] found 10 men red of blood and dead. AVM Save [us] from evil. [We] have 10 men by the sea to look after our ships 14 days' travel from this island. [In the year] 1362."*

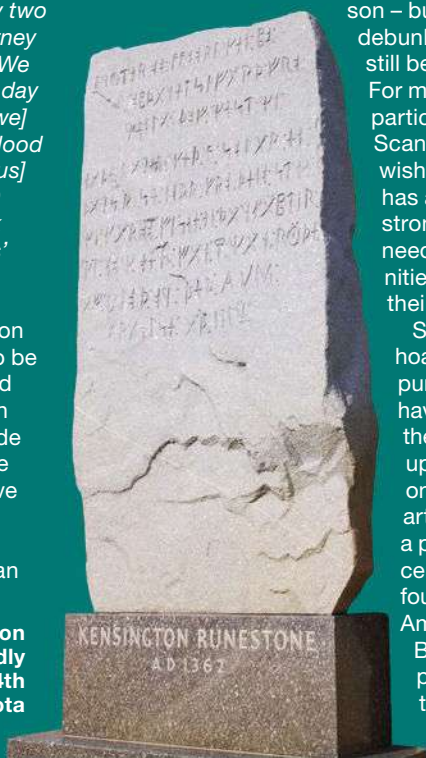
On closer examination the runes turned out to be a mixture of types used from the 9th to the 11th century, and homemade symbols. The language used was the distinctive Swedish-Norwegian dialect spoken by the numerous Scandinavian

settlers in Minnesota in the 1890s, while the date was based on the Arabic system of notation, which was not used in 14th-century Scandinavia.

The stone was a fake, probably made by its discoverer, a former stonemason – but despite academic debunking, some romantics still believe it to be genuine. For many Americans, particularly those with Scandinavian ancestry, the wish to believe that the US has a heroic Viking past is strong, and linked to the needs of immigrant communities to put down roots in their adopted homeland.

Since the Kensington hoax, several more purported Viking artefacts have been 'discovered' in the US but none has stood up to scrutiny. So far, only one genuine Norse artefact has been found: a penny of Norway's 11th-century king Olaf Kyrre, found on a medieval Native American site in Maine.

But it is likely that this was planted, as the context of the find is not recorded.



The Kensington Runestone, purportedly dating from the 14th century, in Minnesota



Artefacts discovered at the Viking settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows, including worked bone, a whetstone and a spindle whorl

a Skraeling who was trying to steal some weapons. The Norse defeated an attempt by the Skraelings to take revenge but, after spending another winter at Leifsbuðir, Karlsefni returned to Greenland.

A second attempt at settlement was made by Leif's half-sister Freydis who, according to *Erik the Red's Saga*, had already been to Vinland as part of Karlsefni's expedition. She had played her part in repelling the Skraeling attack, terrifying them by baring one of her breasts and beating it with a sword. Freydis was an abrasive woman, unsuited to leadership, and her attempt at settlement ended when half the party were killed in a deadly internecine feud. Only one further voyage to Vinland is recorded. In 1121 Erik Gnutsson, the bishop of Greenland, set out for Vinland but the fate of his expedition is not known.

Archaeological proof of a Norse presence in North America came to light in 1961 with the discovery of turf longhouses and workshops at L'Anse aux Meadows at the northern tip of Newfoundland. The longhouse is the typical Norse dwelling but similar houses were also built by the Inuit and other Native American peoples. What proved beyond doubt that this was a Norse settlement was the large number of metal artefacts discovered at the site, including wrought iron ship rivets and a typically Scandinavian bronze ring pin.

Stone loom weights and a spindle whorl provided evidence for weaving at the site. As this was a female activity in Viking Scandinavia, this confirmed the saga



Archaeologists led by Patricia Sutherland excavate a site in Tanfield Valley on Baffin Island, Arctic Canada, which they believe could provide evidence of Norse trading in North America in the 14th century

“As far as Native Americans were concerned, the Norse voyages might as well never have happened – they had no influence on North America’s cultural development”

accounts of women taking part in the Norse voyages of exploration. Radiocarbon dates from organic matter at the site show that it was occupied briefly, between 980 and 1020, which accords well with the saga traditions.

The environment around L’Anse aux Meadows bears little resemblance to the saga descriptions of Vinland. Winters there are severe and there are no wild grapes so it is unlikely to be Leifsbuðir. It is more likely that L’Anse aux Meadows was a base for expeditions took place is proved by the presence of butternuts among food remains on the site. An American species of walnut, butternuts grow no further north than New Brunswick, 500 miles to the south.

The Vinland conundrum

So if Vinland was not at L’Anse aux Meadows, where was it? Helluland and Markland can fairly certainly be identified as Baffin Island and Labrador, respectively, but the saga descriptions of Vinland contain mutually incompatible details. The salmon described in Leif’s account place Vinland north of the

Hudson river and the grapes place it south of the St Lawrence. That would be somewhere in the Canadian Maritimes or New England, but there are no frost-free winters north of Chesapeake Bay.

The length of the shortest day is no help in determining Vinland’s latitude because it is not based on clock times – the Vikings did not have clocks – so, unless there are new archaeological discoveries, we’ll probably never know the location of Vinland.

The Norse attempt to settle Vinland was fleeting – it was all over in about 20 years and probably involved fewer than 200 people. It was doomed to failure. The distances were too great, the small Greenland colony did not have the population to support a colonising venture, and their iron weapons did not give the Norse a decisive advantage over the far more numerous natives.

Yet this was not the end of the Norse presence in North America. The Greenland colony survived until the mid-15th century when the impact of the Little Ice Age killed it off. The Greenlanders continued to sail to Markland to cut wood until at least as late as

1347, and they travelled high into the Arctic, hunting polar bears, seals and walrus. There, around 1170, they met with the Thule Inuit, and these contacts continued until the end of the colony. Norse artefacts have been found on many Thule sites in the Canadian Arctic, and a probable Norse hunting camp has recently been identified at Tanfield Valley on Baffin Island.

Judged objectively, the impact of the Norse discovery of America was slight. News of the Norse discoveries soon reached Europe but it did not change Europeans’ world view in the way that Columbus’s later discovery did: no one suspected that Vinland was part of a new continent. There is no evidence that Columbus knew about Vinland when he set out on his fateful voyage in 1492. As far as Native Americans were concerned, the Norse voyages might as well never have happened – they had no influence whatsoever on North America’s cultural development.

Despite this, Thorvald Eriksson’s fatal encounter with the Skraelings does mark a significant moment in world history: it was the end of humanity’s 70,000-year journey out of Africa. The descendents of peoples who had left Africa and migrated east through Asia to the Americas had finally met the descendents of people who had left Africa and migrated west. The circle of the world was finally closed. **H**

John Haywood is a historian and author of *Northmen* (Head of Zeus, 2015)

Janina Ramirez on... **why the ‘Dark Ages’ weren’t dark**

“The Anglo-Saxons navigated the motorways of the sea, trading in goods and ideas at the limits of the known world”

“**T**he young hero stripped himself then (that was God Almighty), strong and resolute. He ascended onto the high gallows, brave in the sight of many there, since he wished to release mankind. I trembled when the man embraced me. However, I dared not bow down to the earth... but I had to stand fast. I was raised a cross.”

This extract from a poem, carved over 1,200 years ago in runes on the sides of the stone cross at Ruthwell (at that time in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, now in south-east Scotland), describes an event that is central to Christianity – the Crucifixion. Yet you’d be forgiven for not recognising it straight away.

The Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, written in powerful alliterative verse, runs to many dozens of lines. But it deviates from Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion. Instead of being weak and passive, Christ is described as a warrior, more akin to Beowulf. His disciples are his comitatus, and the cross is personified to become an active and loyal follower of his warrior king. This is radical poetry, and radical theology.

That the poem was etched onto an actual cross, giving a voice to the Christian symbol in a physical and symbolic way, makes it all the more remarkable. That this cross was also carved with images of birds and beasts, scenes from the Bible and Christian esoterica reveals further layers of complexity. The Ruthwell Cross, made by Anglo-Saxons, remains one of the most beautiful and challenging artefacts from the millennium between the fall of Rome and the Reformation.

Yet this stunning object was made during a period commonly termed ‘The Dark Ages’. That name leaves me cold. For centuries, historians have seen the absence of written records – a lacuna resulting from the collapse of the Roman empire – as a sign of widespread ignorance and barbarism. Because the Anglo-Saxons built in wood, they have not left behind glamorous stone architecture. Because they prized metalworking, they have not left behind the glut of painting and sculpture that typified the ancient world. Because they were an oral society, committing vast quantities of information to memory rather than writing it down, they have not left behind reams of texts. But a ‘Dark Age’ theirs was not.

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Janina Ramirez is an art historian and broadcaster, author of *The Private Lives of the Saints: Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England* (WH Allen, 2015)

It was, however, different. In so many ways the Anglo-Saxon period deviates from the more recognisable classical tradition that has come to define western society. Their attitudes to the natural world, the sea, the beating hearts of woods and glens, are all different from our own. It is these differences that captivate me. And they are all the more important when we consider that the Anglo-Saxons were the people that gave England its language, culture and identity.

Anglo-Saxon England was a multiracial, cosmopolitan place, where incoming Germanic tribes married and lived alongside Roman-Britons, Celts and people arriving in the British Isles from north, south, east and west. Though reduced to a fragmentary echo in the archaeological record, this point sometimes comes glaringly into focus. For example, the Sutton Hoo ship burial included Celtic hanging bowls from Ireland alongside silver from Constantinople, armour from Sweden, coins from Gaul and jewels from Afghanistan. Theirs was not a parochial, limited world in which everyone lived nasty, brutish, short lives within a few miles of where they were born. They navigated the motorways of the sea, trading in goods and ideas at the limits of the known world.

With the arrival of Christianity at the turn of the seventh century, the Germanic pagan Anglo-Saxons and their pantheon of thunder-making, one-eyed gods and goddesses were welcomed into a new international organisation. But rather than simply transform in line with the fashion of continental Europe and the papacy, the Anglo-Saxons filtered Christian ideas through their own long established artistic and literary traditions. So in *The Dream of the Rood* Christ becomes a warrior, and new Christian objects such as manuscripts are covered with pages of writhing beasts and interlaced birds.

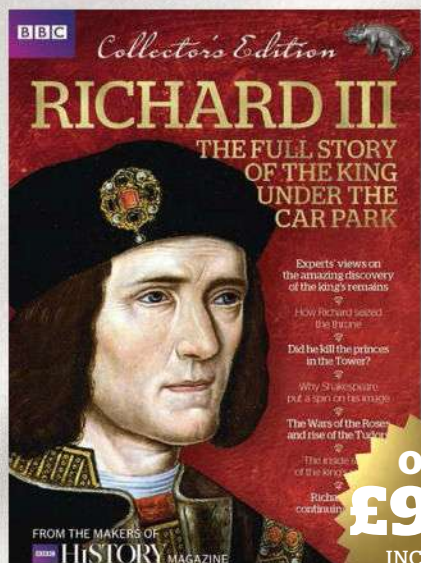
The seventh and eighth centuries saw the production of some of the most enigmatic and visually stunning art produced in England. The Lindisfarne Gospels is the remarkable achievement of one dedicated scribe. The Franks Casket is a riddle in bone, straddling the worlds of Germanic legend, Christianity, Judaism and Roman history. Saint Cuthbert’s coffin is one of the oldest surviving Anglo-Saxon wood carvings, engraved with runes and talismanic figures to protect the saint’s body. Each of these examples rewards a lifetime of study.

Yet the Anglo-Saxons will always be tantalisingly out of reach. We see them through a glass darkly, but what we see shimmers and shines. It is by no means dark. **H**



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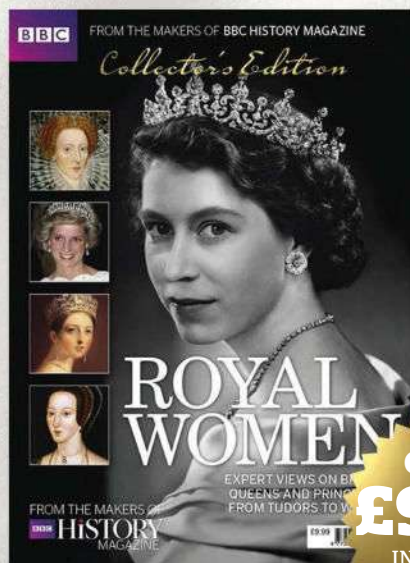


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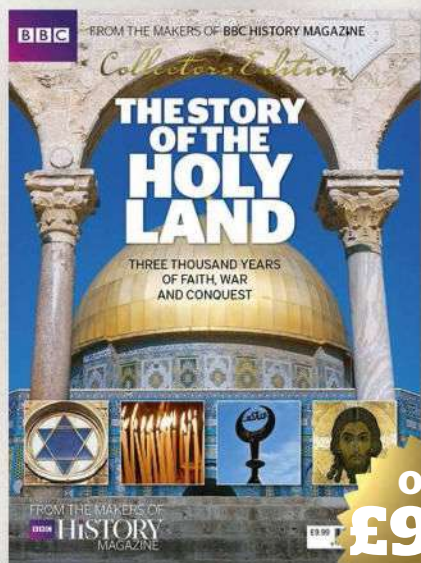


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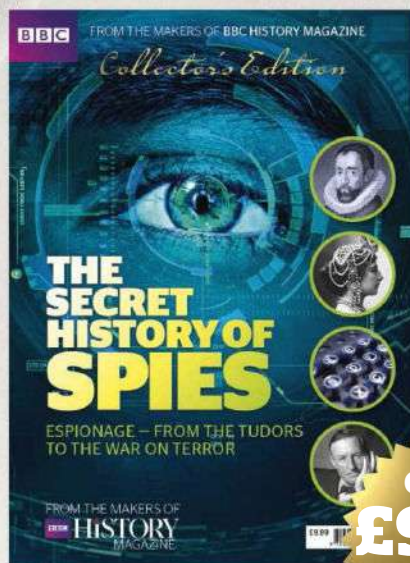


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